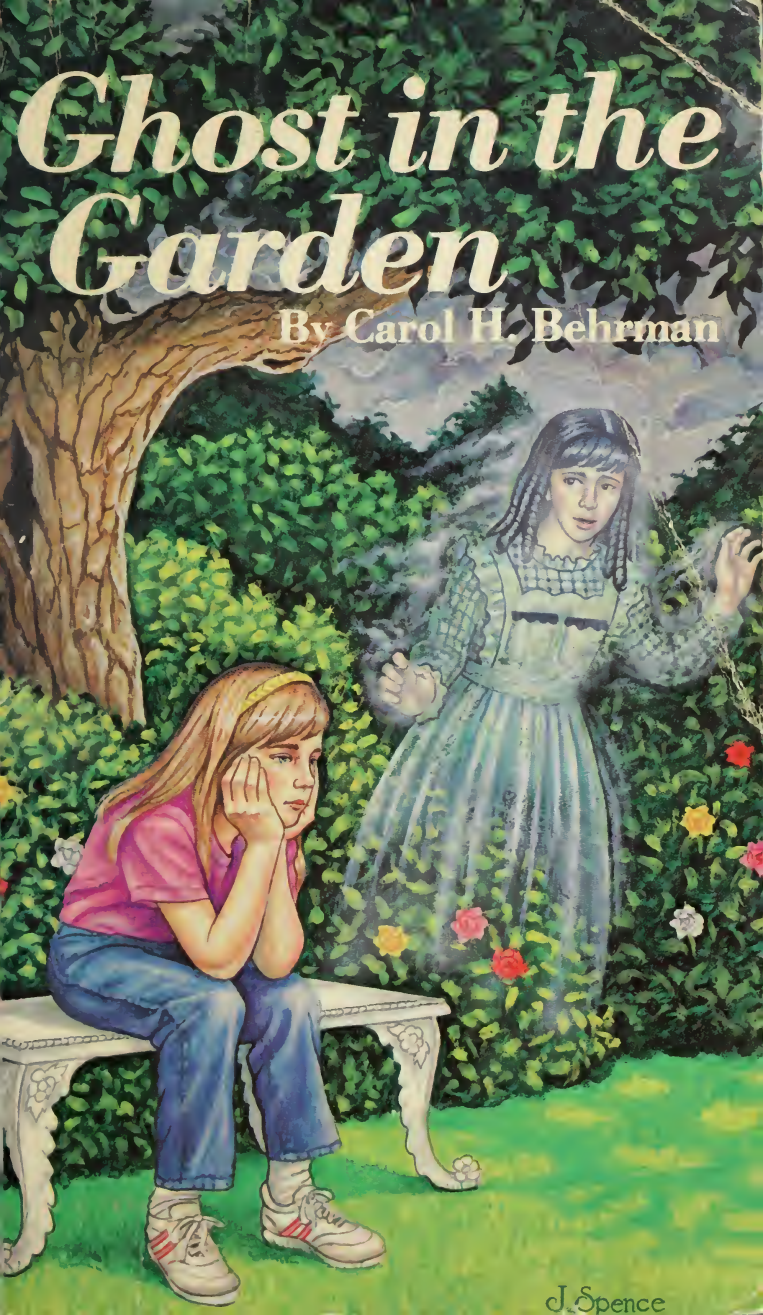
Ghost in the Garden

By Carol H. Behrman



J. Spence

TIMMONS

Ghost in the Garden

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By Carol H. Behrman

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To Bonnie

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1
JENNIE ALONE

For the first ten years of her life Jennie Andrews was perfectly content with the house in which she lived. It was set neatly on a street of many small houses in a bustling town. Jennie's school was only two blocks away. She had many friends and was always at the center of a hubbub of activity. Jennie was happy and busy.

But Jennie's mother and father were not happy with their surroundings. Mr. Andrews did not go out to work like most fathers. He was an artist and worked at home. Jennie was proud of her father. One of his paintings hung in a museum in a large city. Jennie's mother was an artist too. She drew illustrations for books.

It wasn't easy for Jennie's parents to do their work in that noisy little house. They were forever throwing their arms up wildly and exclaiming, "This is impossible!" The doorbell kept buzzing; the telephone ringing. Jennie and her friends ran noisily through the tiny rooms. The PTA called; neighbors dropped in; delivery trucks roared. It was not a quiet place.

One afternoon Jennie's father jumped up for the tenth time that day complaining, "It's impossible!" as a group of Jennie's giggling friends pounded on the door.

"This is it!" Jennie's mother announced. "It's time we made a change. Why don't we buy that house in the country we're always talking about?"

Mr. Andrews loved the idea. "Why not, indeed!" he proclaimed as he smiled for the first time that afternooon. Jennie's parents had been talking for months about the possibility of moving to the country away from the hubbub of the busy town. They spoke wistfully about lots of room and privacy in which to work.

The very next day Jennie and her parents drove out to the country in search of a house. It must have been their lucky day. They fell in love with the first house they saw that had a FOR SALE sign on it. The place seemed perfect—a great, rambling three-story building covered with layers of thick green ivy. There were paths and gardens in back, larger than their whole block in town, and all around were acres of soft, deep woods.

"It's lovely," Mrs. Andrews exclaimed, as she took down the number on the sign.

Mr. Andrews agreed. "Just right for our work. Let's call right away. It's still early. Maybe we can make a deal today."

"It looks like the White House," Jennie marveled. She stared in admiration at the stately columns guarding the front porch.

Jennie was thrilled when her parents bought the house. "What fun it's going to be," she told her friends later, "to live in such a marvelous old place." Jennie chattered excitedly about all the interesting nooks and crannies and the large, spooky attic. She couldn't wait to explore all the odd, hidden places, inside and out.

But then the time came for Jennie to say goodbye to her friends. It was the last week in June, and the school year had ended. The other kids were excitedly making plans for all the summer things

they were going to do together. Jennie started to realize that she was not going to be part of this fun. She was moving away—far from her friends.

I'll never see them again, Jennie thought as tears stung her eyes.

The Andrews family moved to their quiet house in the country. It didn't take Jennie long to see that she didn't like being alone. To make matters worse, a heavy, gray rain came down steadily for the first six days. The hours crawled by in dreary succession. It took only two afternoons for Jennie to explore all the nooks and crannies inside the house. She went through the attic in just one morning. That done, she wanted someone to play with, but the nearest house was a mile away and the Jennie didn't even know who lived there.

Jennie's father noticed her shuffling about the house with a long face. "Didn't the people who sold us this house mention that they had a daughter about Jennie's age?" he asked. The house the Andrewses had bought had not been occupied for some time. It had been part of an estate. The former owners, who had inherited it, lived elsewhere in town. "I think they said her name was Beth," Mr. Andrews continued.

Jennie's eyes brightened immediately.

"Don't you remember?" asked Mrs. Andrews. "They were planning to send her off to camp for the whole summer." The brightness in Jennie's eyes faded. Her mother patted her sympathetically. "Why don't you read, dear?" But Jennie couldn't read all day. The long hours seemed as gray and gloomy as the weather. When the sun finally came out, Mrs. Andrews suggested, "Go out into the garden and play, Jennie."

That was easy enough for her mother to say, thought Jennie. The house was great for her parents. They had found the peace and quiet they

needed. But Jennie grew quieter and sadder every day.

Jennie began to spend a lot of time in the rose garden. She'd sit for hours staring at the house and brooding about how she hated it.

The rose garden was a sweet-smelling enclosure far out on the rear grounds. The circular garden was formed by the bushes—a round tangle of roses of every type and color. There were climbers and ramblers and tea roses—reds, pinks, yellows, and whites. In the center was a grassy clearing, completely hidden from the house by the tight knot of thorny bushes. There was a white wrought-iron bench on the grass, decorated with carvings of roses. Jennie felt more comfortable here than anywhere else. There was a sort of warmth about the spot. Here, Jennie read or daydreamed or just sat feeling sorry for herself. It would have been a great place to play with friends—if only there had been friends!

One afternoon Jennie found herself walking nervously round and round the rose garden. The sky was bright and sunny, and the sweet scent of roses hung in the air. But inside herself, Jennie felt gray, cold, and unsettled. She hated the house. She was angry with her parents. Even the roses seemed horrid with their brilliantly colored cheerful faces. Jennie angrily seized one, ripped it off, and threw it to the ground.

"You shouldn't pick a rose that way."

Jennie turned, startled, to see an old man with bent shoulders, a shiny bald head, and the most wrinkled face she had ever seen. In that ancient, creased face twinkled a pair of merry blue eyes.

"How do, Miss Jennie." His voice was hoarse and cracked. "I'm Ben, the gardener. Your mother told me I might run into you out here."

"I didn't know we had a gardener!" she quickly remarked. Jennie was surprised, but not fright-

ened. Who would be frightened by such friendly eyes?

"I used to work for the people who had this house before your folks," Ben explained. "There's a heap of gardening to be done around here—what with a rose garden, a tulip garden, a dahlia garden, and almost every variety of shrub in the encyclopedia. So I meandered over here and asked your folks if they wanted me to come over once or twice a week to take care of the whole shebang. Your mother was happy to see me. She doesn't seem to know much about gardening." As he spoke, Ben slowly walked around the circle of rose bushes, feeling the branches and examining the flowers. Jennie followed. *At last!* she thought. *Someone to talk to!*

"Mom doesn't garden much," Jennie told Ben. "Daddy once told her she had a 'brown thumb.' You know, people who can make things grow have a 'green thumb.' When Mom plants things, they usually end up turning brown." Jennie talked excitedly, eager to get a conversation going.

"Yup," Ben answered briefly as he inspected the red roses with interest. "You folks sure need a gardener round here."

"But Mom's a good artist." Jennie felt as if she should somehow redeem her mother's character. "She draws pictures and they put them in books."

"Yup," commented Ben. He drew a pair of long scissors from his pocket. "Never tear a rose from the stem," he explained. "It hurts them when you do that."

Could roses have feelings? Jennie thought of the flower she had ripped off and thrown to the ground. She wished she hadn't.

Ben continued. "Always cut neatly and quickly and leave a long piece of stem attached." He snipped off a large red rose and handed it to Jennie. "That's fer your mother."

How did Ben know that her mother liked *red*

roses? Jennie followed Ben down the path out of the garden toward the front of the house. She didn't want him to leave. She tried to continue the conversation.

"Mom's not much of a cook either," she informed him. "That's why we eat out a lot. She's so busy thinking about the book she's working on that she goofs up in the kitchen." Jennie had to walk quickly to keep up with Ben. He moved spryly for such an old man. "Sometimes," she confided, "she lets dinner burn. Once she put watercolors in the spaghetti sauce."

"Gotta go now," muttered Ben, heading toward a rickety old pickup truck in the driveway. "Be back on Tuesday." He climbed into the truck and started up the engine. Jennie waved.

"Good-bye, Ben," she called. "Can I help you in the garden on Tuesday?"

Ben waved back. "Sure thing," he agreed. He shifted into gear, then suddenly stuck his head out the window. "Say," he called out, scratching his head in amazement, "what color did that there spaghetti sauce end up?"

"Green," Jennie told him.

At dinner that evening the conversation turned to Ben. Mrs. Andrews described his unexpected visit. "He looked me over and shook his head as though he could tell right away how little I knew about gardening. He asked if I had made plans for the care of the grounds." Mrs. Andrews smiled. "Of course, I hadn't even thought about it. Then he began to talk about all the things that must be done—fertilizing, weeding, pruning, and on and on. I realized that we could never handle it ourselves. Did you know that Ben has taken care of these grounds for 50 years? And before that, his father was the gardener. I suppose he sort of goes with the place."

Jennie played with the meat loaf on her plate. "How old is this house, anyway?"

"Ninety years old," her father said.

"*Ninety* years!" repeated Jennie. "Wow! That *is* old! You'd think it'd be falling apart by now. This house doesn't look that old."

"In those days they built houses to last," commented Mr. Andrews. "With proper upkeep, this house could last forever. And it has received good care. According to the deed, one family lived here from the time it was built until the last survivor died a couple of years ago. It's been empty since then. We are the first new people to live here."

"Did you tell Ben he could be our gardener?" Jennie asked her mother.

Mrs. Andrews frowned. "It was more as if he told me. He said he would come on Tuesdays and Fridays. I don't think he would have taken no for an answer."

"Won't that cost a lot?" asked Jennie.

"The fee Ben mentioned was surprisingly low. I had the feeling that Ben would even work for nothing. He seems to take such a personal interest in these gardens."

"Ben showed me how to cut a rose," remarked Jennie.

"Then you met him?" asked her father.

"Jennie met Ben this afternoon in the rose garden," Mrs. Andrews answered. "He sent in a lovely long-stemmed rose for me."

"He's real nice," said Jennie. "At least he's someone to talk to."

Jennie's parents exchanged glances. Mrs. Andrews put her hand on Jennie's arm. "Don't worry, Jennie. In the fall when school opens you'll make lots of new friends."

"If I don't die of loneliness before then!" Jennie mumbled.

Mr. Andrews tried to change the subject. "This is excellent meat loaf, dear. Did you put something new in it?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Andrews vaguely. "I'm not sure. One of the bottles I used was different, now that I think about it, but I don't remember what it contained."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Jennie and her father together. Jennie made a hideous face and put down the forkful of meat loaf she had been about to stuff into her mouth.

Mrs. Andrews looked at them uncertainly. "Perhaps I'd better go look at that bottle." She got up and went into the kitchen. A moment later she reappeared, smiling. "It's all right," she sang out. "I saw the bottle and then I remembered. It's soy sauce. I put soy sauce into the recipe. Do you like it?"

Mr. Andrews heaved a sigh of relief. "It's delicious."

"Much better than watercolors," added Jennie, laughing.

2
SAMANTHA

Jennie was in the rose garden, painting. She had set up her easel near the white iron bench and was trying to copy a yellow rose bush. It wasn't easy. Jennie had not inherited her parents' artistic talents. Her roses looked more like oranges than flowers. She put down her brush and dropped onto the bench with a sigh of frustration. Her only talent or desire, it seemed, was playing with other children.

"If only I had a friend!" she sighed bitterly.

Suddenly, the sky darkened as if a heavy cloud had been thrown across the sun. The soft breeze died into a hushed stillness. Jennie rubbed her eyes. Everything seemed to be standing still—waiting.

Then Jennie noticed that the leaves on the rose bushes were fluttering. *How odd*, Jennie thought, because there was not a bit of wind. Jennie watched in startled fascination as the leaves seemed to become more and more agitated. One bush, in particular, seemed more disturbed than the others. Its leaves crackled and fluttered.

The branches parted. A girl stepped out.

Jennie jumped up, startled at this sudden appearance. Who was this girl and where had she come from? Jennie felt a touch of fright. It was so very strange! Then, as if to dispel Jennie's fear, the

sun came out again and the leaves stopped rustling. Everything was just as it had been before, except for the girl, who smiled at Jennie in a friendly manner.

"Oh, dear!" the girl exclaimed, rubbing her arm. "I've scratched myself on the thorns." As Jennie stared, unable to believe her eyes, the girl reached into her pocket and pulled out a lacy handkerchief. Gently, she dabbed at the injured arm.

"H-m," she murmured, holding the handkerchief up and examining it. "At least it's not bleeding." She folded the handkerchief neatly and put it back into her pocket. "Hello," she said to Jennie.

The girl's friendly, matter-of-fact manner was reassuring, even though her appearance was remarkable. She was taller than Jennie and sturdily built. Her coal-black hair fell in carefully arranged ringlets all about her shoulders. She had wide, sparkling dark eyes set deep in a round, doll-like face. But Jennie couldn't believe the girl's clothes. She wore an old-fashioned dress of blue-and-white checked gingham. The full skirt was long, reaching almost to her ankles. Over the dress she wore a stiffly starched white pinafore with two large pockets. On her legs were thick white stockings, and she wore shiny black patent leather shoes.

Jennie stared at the elegant apparition. She looked down at her own skinny, sloppy self in paint-splattered shirt and tight, faded jeans. She was speechless.

Not so her visitor. "I'm Samantha," the girl announced, settling herself easily on a bench facing the astonished Jennie.

"Where . . . where did you come from?" gasped Jennie, finding her voice at last. "I didn't see you come up the path."

"Didn't you call me?" asked Samantha, smiling. "I've come to play with you."

Jennie was even more bewildered than before. But she didn't have a chance to ask any more questions. Samantha had jumped up and was critically eyeing Jennie's painting.

"What lovely oranges!" she said. "My, but you paint well."

"I do?" asked Jennie. "But they're supposed to be roses."

"Roses?" Samantha's face lit up and she began to laugh. Her laughter was so lilting that Jennie couldn't help but giggle too.

How great it is to have someone to have fun with! I've got a friend! thought Jennie. She was flooded with a sudden feeling of happiness. "I'm Jennie Andrews," she said. "Do you live around here, Samantha?"

Samantha took Jennie's hand in hers. Her smile was warm and friendly. "Yes." She waved her free arm vaguely. "Very near here. Near enough so I can come and play with you every afternoon."

Jennie couldn't believe her good fortune!

Samantha released her hand gently, and continued. "I'll come each day about this hour. I know it's rather late in the afternoon, but we shall still have an hour or two to play before dark. Can you stay out till then?"

"Just so I'm home for sure before dark," replied Jennie. "But why can't you come earlier?"

"I just can't, that's all! You mustn't ask me why!" There was a sharp edge to Samantha's voice. For a moment, her eyes clouded and her features hardened. Then she smiled and it was as if the sun had come out again.

"We shall have jolly times together, Jennie," she declared brightly. "I've lived here all my life and I know so many interesting places to explore."

"You do?" Jennie was fascinated.

"Yes, indeed." Samantha settled herself again on

the bench, smoothed her skirt primly, and motioned Jennie to sit beside her. Jennie obeyed. She was hypnotized.

"First," declared Samantha, "I'm going to show you my cave."

"Your cave?" Jennie was impressed. "A real cave?"

"Yes, indeed," said Samantha. "It's a marvelous secret cave, deep and dark, and there are all sorts of fascinating things inside."

"Like what?" asked Jennie, open-mouthed.

"Oh, all kinds of unusual colored rocks, rusty old guns, bones, and other things."

"Bones!" Jennie was wild with excitement. "Where is this cave?"

"Out there." Samantha pointed toward the woods. "I found it by chance one day when I was out walking. And I'll show you my tree house too. Of course . . . ," here her voice faltered a bit, "I can't be sure it's still standing, but we'll see. My papa built it himself and he told me it could stand a hundred years." She pronounced *papa* with the accent on the last syllable.

"And then," continued Samantha, "I'll show you where the bobolinks build their nests and where the rabbits hide and where there's a hidden stream that is always filled with little golden fish. We'll have lots of fun."

"That sounds great!" exclaimed Jennie. She shook her head with amazement. "I can't believe you're really here, Samantha. But why do you. . . ." She had been about to ask *why do you wear such strange clothes*, but she stopped herself. She didn't want to hurt Samantha's feelings. It would be terrible to lose this friend so soon after finding her. So she finished lamely, "Why do you . . . why did you come here?"

Samantha's dark eyes grew even darker. "Chil-

dren need other children. Parents don't always understand that."

"That's right!" agreed Jennie. "My parents are so happy here they don't realize how bad it's been for me. But from now on, it'll be different, won't it?"

"Yes," exclaimed Samantha as she jumped up, pulling Jennie up after her. "Come on. We still have an hour before sunset. We can do a lot of things in an hour. I'll show you where the bobolink nests are. There may even be some eggs inside."

Jennie hesitated, ashamed to show her ignorance. "What are bobolinks?" she asked shyly.

"They're birds, silly." Samantha giggled. "But don't be embarrassed about not knowing. I'm sure there are lots of things I can learn from you. I don't know how to draw roses *or* oranges."

They both laughed at that, and Samantha led Jennie toward the woods.

"I'm ten," remarked Jennie. "How old are you?"

"I turned 11 last month," Samantha replied. "Isn't it too bad I did not know you then? I had the loveliest birthday party." Her eyes became dreamy. "So many girls came. They looked lovely in their organdy dresses. Mama hung Japanese lanterns all around the rose garden. It was like a fairyland. She set up a beautiful table in the center. All pink and yellow and red—just like the roses."

"Do you have a rose garden too?"

"Why, yes," said Samantha. She stood somewhat apart from Jennie now. "It was lovely." She sighed dreamily as she went on remembering the party. "The roses in bloom . . . the swaying lanterns . . . the girls in their rustling dresses . . . ." Suddenly she stopped and rubbed her eyes. When she looked at Jennie again, she seemed to have forgotten what it was she had been talking about, for she snatched Jennie's hand and exclaimed eagerly, "Why are we standing here? Let's find the nests."

Skipping ahead, Samantha led the way into the woods. She pointed out trail signs along the way, a bare oak, a clump of red-leaved bushes, a broken log . . . "so you can find your own way if you come here alone." They stopped in front of a clump of bushes covered with large blue berries.

"The blueberries are ripe!" exclaimed Samantha. "Tomorrow we must bring baskets and gather them." She picked a berry and popped it into her mouth. "M-m, delicious!" She plucked another and handed it to Jennie. It, too, was delicious—plump and juicy. For a few minutes the girls gorged themselves.

"Let's save the rest for tomorrow," Samantha suggested. "Follow me now. The bobolinks usually build a nest right behind these bushes." She picked her way through, with Jennie close behind. They searched every bush, although Jennie wasn't quite sure what she was looking for since she had never seen a bobolink or a bobolink's nest. They looked and looked. Finally Samantha cried, "It's no use. They're not here. They must have found another spot by now."

"What's that?" Jennie exclaimed as she pointed to the branch of a nearby tree.

"It's a nest!" Samantha stood on tiptoe and stretched her neck to see. "But I don't think it's a bobolink nest."

"Then what kind is it?"

Jennie's question was answered immediately, but not by Samantha. A large blue bird suddenly flew into the nest and began to squawk loudly at the intruders.

"It's a bluejay," cried Samantha, covering her ears with her hands. "What a horrible noise!"

The bird squawked louder and began to flap its large wings menacingly.

"Let's get out of here," said Samantha. "Those

bluejays are mean birds. This one probably thinks we're trying to steal her eggs."

Hastily plucking a few more berries, the girls began to run. The bluejay screeched after them like an angry witch. They ran until they were out of breath and the bird's harsh cries were far behind them. Then they sat on a log to rest. There they munched the last of the berries.

"It's almost sundown," commented Samantha. "We're practically out of the woods now." She pointed straight ahead to where the woods ended past a large fir tree and a tangle of underbrush. "See, there is your garden."

Samantha walked with Jennie as far as the garden.

"I'll come back tomorrow," she promised softly. "Don't forget to bring a basket for the berries. And maybe," she added, "I'll take you to the tree house."

"Good-bye, Samantha," said Jennie.

"Good-bye, Jennie." Samantha turned toward the woods, and quickly she was gone.

3
BERRY PICKING

Jennie's parents were sipping coffee on the porch. Jennie came bursting in on them, breathless. Her mouth and shirt were stained from the berry juice. Her jeans were ripped in several places. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled.

"What's happened, Jennie?" asked her mother, with concern in her voice

Jennie sank into a chair and tried to begin. "I . . . well . . . she . . . that is . . . I don't know exactly how to tell you."

"Try, Jennie." Her father leaned across the table encouragingly.

"The most marvelous thing has happened—I think I have found a friend!"

Jennie's parents settled back in their seats, much relieved to hear that Jennie had not been involved in some ghastly accident.

"Her name is Samantha," continued Jennie. "She has lived around here all her life and she's my age."

"Samantha?" Mr. Andrews repeated the name as if it were a question. "What's her last name?"

"She didn't say." Jennie was impatient with unimportant details. "But I'll ask her tomorrow. She is going to play with me every day."

"Where does she live?" Jennie's father quickly inquired. He always insisted on knowing practical details.

"She didn't say." Her father's endless questions seemed like a heavy door that threatened to slam shut on Jennie's excitement. "It must be nearby," Jennie continued. "She walked home through the woods."

"That's odd," remarked Mr. Andrews. "The only house she could reach that way is the Miller place, and I was told that an elderly couple live there alone. She would have had to walk miles to get anywhere else in that direction. What did she look like?"

"She's very pretty," declared Jennie hotly. "And I can tell that she's nice even if she wears funny clothes and has an old-fashioned name and we don't know where she lives. . . ." Jennie's voice broke and tears started to come to her eyes.

Mrs. Andrews darted a reproving glance at her husband. She got up quickly and, taking Jennie's hand, pulled her daughter to her feet. "I think it's marvelous that you have a new friend," she declared. "Daddy and I are happy for you." She gave Jennie a big hug. Then, to change the seriousness of the mood, she began to hum a lilting tune, and led Jennie in a silly little dance around the porch.

Mr. Andrews sat thoughtfully for a while before speaking. "Your mother's right, Jennie," he finally said. "You've always chosen nice friends. We trust your judgment."

The next day was Tuesday. Ben, the gardener, came to begin his work. Jennie was delighted to see him. The hours flew by as she followed him about and chattered on and on while he cultivated and pruned, fertilized, watered, and mowed the grass. Ben was a man of few words but he listened intently to all that Jennie had to say.

"I have a new friend, Ben." Jennie couldn't wait to share her most important news. "Her name is Samantha. Do you know her?"

"Samantha, eh?" the old man repeated in his high, cracked voice. "Seems like I heerd a name like that before, though I can't rightly remember where." He frowned and scratched his head hard as if trying to dig out the memory. "I dunno, though. Can't rightly say I know of any young 'un round here now goes by that name." He went back to trimming. Snip, snip went the heavy shears.

"I think she lives on the other side of the woods," explained Jennie.

Ben laughed. Actually, it was more like a cackle. "T'other side of the woods? They ain't no children at all over that way."

"Oh, yes," Jennie corrected him sharply. "Samantha lives there."

"Nope!" Ben was firm.

Jennie was annoyed. She pouted for a while. But Jennie was never strong on silence and soon she was chattering again at the old gardener. "This afternoon, Samantha is going to take me to her tree house."

"Thet so?"

"Yes. It's in the woods."

Old Ben scratched his head again. "That's funny," he remarked. "Seems to me there's an old tree house near the pond. Way up in a big oak tree. But nobody uses it anymore. It's half fallen down. Why, thet there tree house must be more than 70 years old. Fact is, it was built by the man who lived in this here very house. He built it for his little daughter."

Jennie laughed. "That must be a different tree house. Samantha's daddy built hers and she isn't 70 years old." Jennie giggled.

Ben shook his head and bent once more to his task, muttering about young 'uns and their carryings-on. After a while, he moved to the herb garden, with Jennie close behind. He showed her

how to tell weeds from young plants and permitted her to help him weed the garden. They worked in friendly silence until Mrs. Andrews called Jennie in to dinner.

Jennie stood up. "Ooh, my back!" she complained. "This is hard work."

"Yup," agreed Ben. "But you did a good job."

Jennie beamed at the praise. "I have to eat quickly," she said, noting that the sun was already moving over the western sky. "Samantha will be here soon. You could meet her, Ben."

Ben shook his head. "I'm jes goin' to finish weeding this area and then I'm leavin'. It's past my quittin' time already." He straightened up and put his hand on his back, groaning. "These old bones can't put in a full day no more."

Jennie said good-bye to Ben and went in. She was glad that her family usually had dinner by 5 o'clock. She and Samantha would have hours to play. On these long summer days, it didn't get dark until 9 or later. When Jennie came out after dinner, Ben and his pickup truck were gone. She ran to the rose garden. It was empty. The air hung heavy with the stillness of a late summer afternoon, and the clearing in the center was filled with the sweet thick fragrance of roses. The sky was blue and cloudless, and the sun was a yellow globe of fire in the west. Jennie was tired after working all day in the garden. She felt hot and sticky all over. She hadn't taken time to shower because she was afraid of missing Samantha. She put down on the bench a large pot she had carried from the house. Her mother hadn't been able to find a basket for gathering berries and had given her a cooking pot instead.

Suddenly, the leaves began to rustle. The light dimmed. Jennie's heart began to beat faster. The same thing had happened yesterday when. . . .

Samantha stepped out from behind a bush.

"Here I am," she announced.

"Oh, Samantha!" Jennie exclaimed. "I'm so glad you came."

"I said I would be here," replied Samantha gravely. "I always keep my word."

She was dressed in the same sort of clothes she had worn the day before, with a clean, stiffly starched pinafore covering her blue-checked dress. Over one arm hung a wide wicker basket decorated with blue ribbons. She looked like an illustration Jennie had once seen for *Alice in Wonderland*. She held out her hand to Jennie. "Come," she called softly. "I'm going to take you to my tree house today, but first we shall go berry picking."

Jennie's weariness vanished. Refreshed and eager, she grabbed up her pot, took Samantha's outstretched hand, and together they set off into the woods.

They followed the same path they had taken the previous day. It was cooler in the woods. The growth was dense and the tall trees formed a thick green roof that kept out the heat of the sun. Only a small amount of light filtered through, and Jennie couldn't help but think about how black and scary it would be at night. But it was comfortably shady now as they skipped along the narrow overgrown path.

"There's a rabbit hole," Samantha pointed out as they passed a small almost covered hole in the ground near a thick-limbed tree. Jennie would never have noticed it, let alone known what it was for. She peered at it, then hurried to catch up with Samantha.

Soon they were at the blueberry patch. The bushes were still as thick with plump, juicy berries as they had been the day before.

"Nobody else ever comes here," remarked Sa-

mantha. "We can have all the berries we want." For the first time she noticed the large pot that Jennie carried. "Where on earth did you get that impossible-looking kettle?" she asked, giggling.

"It's one of my mom's cooking pots," explained Jennie. Her eyes rested on Samantha's pretty basket. "This pot was all she could find."

Samantha giggled again, and then stopped hurriedly when she saw the hurt expression in Jennie's eyes. "I'm sorry, Jennie. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. It's just that . . . well, it *does* look sort of funny."

Jennie examined the object in her hand. "I guess it does look silly," she agreed. "But that's my mom! She couldn't find a basket. Things like this are always happening at our house. Mom never seems to have things in the house when we need them. She's always rushing out to the store at the last minute. Sometimes I'm even late for school because she puts all my socks in the dryer the night before and forgets to turn it on."

Jennie had put her pot down on the ground as she described her mother. Both girls sat on a large, gray rock that rose from the ground like a miniature mountain. "I just wish," continued Jennie, "that she could be more like other mothers . . . more . . . well, *dependable*. Honestly, sometimes I feel that she is younger than I am. She's so *flighty!*"

Samantha leaped up, her round dark eyes wide with disapproval. "Jennie Andrews," she exclaimed sharply, "you shouldn't say things like that about your mother!" She shook her dark curls. "Why, I bet that lots of girls wish their mothers were more jolly and loving, and even just half as much fun as your mother is!"

"Do you *know* my mother?" asked Jennie in surprise.

Samantha suddenly became confused. "Well,

no . . . I mean . . . that is . . . I just guessed she's that way from what you have told me. Well, isn't she?"

"Yes," agreed Jennie. She smiled, remembering things like the merry dance on the porch and the watercolors in the spaghetti sauce.

Samantha smiled too. There was something odd about Samantha's eyes, thought Jennie. They were so deep and knowing. Sometimes they didn't look at all like the eyes of a young girl. Right now there was a kind of gray haze over her eyes, as if her thoughts were somewhere else . . . somewhere long ago and far away.

After a long pause, Samantha spoke. "How I miss my mama," she cried sadly.

"Where is your mother?"

"My dear mama is with God in heaven."

Jennie was startled. "Do you mean she's dead?"

"Yes."

Jennie remembered something. "But, Samantha," she objected, "just yesterday you told me that your mother decorated the garden for your birthday party last month."

"Did I?" Samantha looked confused and uncertain, like a lost kitten. "Let me see . . . ." She seemed to be thinking hard, trying to remember. "Oh, yes, I must have told you about the pretty Japanese lanterns that Mama hung for my party. I remember now. But it was so very long ago."

"You said it was just last month," protested Jennie.

"It couldn't have been last month. Mama has been dead for years. I must have been thinking about another party—long ago."

Jennie was not satisfied. "Who takes care of you, Samantha?"

Samantha straightened her crisp, white apron. "I live with dear Papa," she replied smoothly, with a hint of a smile. "We have a housekeeper, but I'm big enough to take care of myself."

An uncomfortable feeling tugged at Jennie like a tight coat. There was something confusing and not quite truthful in Samantha's story. Then Samantha seized her basket. "Don't be so serious, Jennie," she exclaimed gaily. "I'm here to play with you and have fun. Let's pick berries. Come *on!*"

4
THE TREE HOUSE

Jennie and Samantha picked berries until their arms ached. It took a long time because they ate as many as they saved. One into the basket or pot and one into the mouth! Finally Samantha announced that her basket was full. Jennie's pot, which was considerably larger, was about three-quarters full. They decided they had done enough berry picking for one day. "Besides," Samantha reminded Jennie, "we want to visit my tree house before dark."

Samantha led the way and Jennie followed, awkwardly carrying the pot. The path became narrower and more overgrown. Sharp thorns scratched Jennie's arms and legs and caught in her hair.

"It's getting dark," Jennie pointed out. "Maybe we should turn back and visit the tree house tomorrow."

Samantha looked back over her shoulder and smiled encouragingly. "There's plenty of daylight yet. The woods are so thick that it seems later than it really is. Besides, we're almost there. Just a few more steps. Right around the next turn."

Jennie couldn't make out a turn ahead. She couldn't even see the path any longer. It was completely covered with ferns and wild flowers. She followed closely behind Samantha.

Suddenly Samantha stopped. "There!" she announced triumphantly, pointing straight ahead. "There it is!"

Jennie peered, squinting in the dim light. A few feet ahead she saw a small greenish pond. The water was thick and stagnant and the banks were covered with moss. On the far side of the pond stood a tall, gnarled oak tree, and in the branches of the tree—sure enough—Jennie could discern the outlines of a structure. A wooden structure! A tree house! As they reached the edge of the pond, a few subdued rays of sunlight broke through the opening in the trees. Jennie could see the tree house distinctly.

"Isn't it lovely?" exclaimed Samantha proudly. "My tree house! Oh, it's been ever so long since I've been here. Come on, Jennie."

Samantha began to run. Jennie followed as best she could, weighed down by the pot of berries. They ran around the edge of the pond. The mossy earth was wet and soft beneath their feet. They reached the other side and stood beneath the towering oak.

Samantha gasped. "Oh, my tree house!"

It was in sad shape, old and neglected. The wood was weathered and cracked. The roof had come loose and was hanging in splinters over one side. Jennie suddenly remembered Ben's words: *There's an old tree house near the pond . . . but nobody uses it anymore. . . . Must be more than 70 years old. . . .*

"Is this really your tree house, Samantha?" demanded Jennie, accusingly. "Your father couldn't have built this for you. It's too *old!*"

Samantha stamped her foot. Her black eyes flashed. "It *is* my tree house, Jennie! It is! I should know what my own dear papa built for me!" She stared at Jennie fiercely. "I never lie, Jennie." Samantha set her basket on the ground and sat down on a moss-encrusted log. "It's just that we haven't

been here in quite some time," she explained more calmly. "Things rot quickly in the woods. You do believe me, don't you, Jennie?"

Jennie sighed and sat down next to Samantha. She didn't reply immediately. She wanted to believe her friend, but the truth was that the tree house looked terribly old. Jennie glanced at Samantha, whose dark eyes were now soft with pleading. Impulsively, Jennie seized her hand. "Of course I believe you, Samantha."

Samantha brightened immediately. "The floor still looks solid," she commented optimistically. "Let's go see."

Samantha ran to the foot of the tree. Jennie followed. They stood directly under the house, looking up. The floor was splintered and weather-darkened, but it did look solid.

"There used to be a ladder going up," Samantha announced. Then she pointed to a pile of sticks nearby. "I guess that's it."

"Perhaps we could climb up," suggested Jennie.

They examined the tree. It was old and sturdy, and there were plenty of thick branches to give them footholds.

"I love to climb trees," exclaimed Samantha. Grabbing hold of the lowest branch, she began to pull herself up.

"Come on, Slowpoke!" Samantha chided Jennie. As nimbly as a monkey, despite her long skirt and apron, Samantha scrambled up and disappeared into the tree house.

Jennie hesitated. She had never climbed a tree before. Fortunately, this big oak was thick and firm, so Jennie felt confident enough to hoist herself up gingerly, one branch at a time. It was actually easier than she had expected. She kept her eyes glued to the tree house above, not daring to look down. Slowly but surely she made her way up. She had almost reached her goal when she happened to

look toward the ground. That was a mistake! Her head began to whirl and a sick, queasy feeling seized the pit of her stomach. She clung to a stout branch and shut her eyes tightly. Soon the nausea and dizziness passed, but she trembled as she continued climbing. Above her, Samantha's head appeared in the doorway, like a housewife greeting a guest. "What's taking you so long?" she called out.

Jennie did not look down again, and in a few seconds she was safely in the house. She plopped down on the floor, immensely relieved to have arrived safely. Almost immediately Samantha was pulling at her. "Get up! It's not necessary to sit on the floor. Look at the lovely benches my papa made."

Jennie looked. Along two sides of the room were built-in wooden benches. "How wonderful," Jennie replied with surprise. The tree house was much nicer than it had appeared from below. It was fitted with the built-in benches, a little table piled with toys, and on the far wall was a door that led, explained Samantha, to a large storage closet. The room was quite spacious. Four or five children could fit inside easily.

Jennie settled herself comfortably on one of the benches. "This is a beautiful tree house."

"My papa built everthing himself," Samantha said proudly. "Papa is a builder, but now he sits at a desk in an office and hardly ever builds things with his own hands. That is why he loves to make things for me." Her eyes grew wistful. "My papa and I are very close, but I do miss him dreadfully when he is away at work."

"My father works at home," Jennie informed Samantha. For the first time, this seemed to Jennie to be a stroke of luck.

"You are so fortunate!" exclaimed Samantha. "I get so lonely sometimes. I don't have any brothers or sisters."

"Neither do I," said Jennie.

"I know," Samantha declared solemnly. "That is why I came to you."

What an odd thing to say, Jennie thought. How could Samantha have known about Jennie's loneliness before they had even met? She was about to question Samantha when her attention was distracted by another sound.

Tap, tap, tap!

"What's that?" The girls listened intently.

Tap . . . tap . . . tap. This time, the tapping was followed by a loud bump, as of something falling.

"It's coming from over there." Jennie pointed to the far wall.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Samantha. "*There is something in the closet!*"

"Or some*one!*" whispered Jennie ominously.

The tapping began again, followed by frantic scratching sounds. The girls stared at each other, wide-eyed. Jennie's heart pounded like a drum.

"Whatever it is," Samantha said, "it has awfully sharp nails."

"Or a knife." Jennie wished immediately that she had kept that thought to herself.

The sounds grew louder. More tapping and scratching was followed by several loud bumping noises.

"I think we'd better leave," said Jennie.

"No! That would be the worst thing we could do. Whatever or whoever it is might follow us. We could panic and get lost in the woods. No, we must open the closet door and find out for sure what is in there."

"No way!" Jennie exclaimed, as her heart almost jumped out of her mouth in terror.

"It is the only way," Samantha assured her. "This is my tree house. Whatever is in that closet has no right to be there."

Jennie was filled with admiration for her friend's bravery. Then Samantha turned her eyes upon Jennie. Even in the dusky light Jennie could see that the other girl's face was drawn and white.

"I'm scared to death," admitted Samantha. "But whatever is in that closet, we are better off facing it right here." She looked around. "If only we had a weapon of some kind."

"How about my pot?" suggested Jennie. "It's awfully heavy."

"That's a good idea," Samantha agreed.

"But we left it down below," Jennie suddenly remembered.

"I'll run down and get it," Samantha quickly responded. "You wait here." She ran to the door.

Jennie was right behind her. "You're not going to leave me alone with *that*, are you?"

"It will only take a moment," Samantha assured her. "We must have a weapon." She slipped out and clambered down the tree. Jennie watched her. The light in the woods was becoming fainter and fainter. The sun was setting. They would have to leave soon if they were to get home before dark. Jennie didn't want to have to walk through those deserted woods in the blackness of night.

Samantha was nimble-footed and swift. In a few moments she was back, with Jennie's pot under one arm. The pot was empty.

"What did you do with the berries?"

"I emptied them on the ground," Samantha explained. "We can always go berry picking another time."

The weird sounds of clawing and scrambling continued from inside the closet.

"How shall we do it, Samantha?" asked Jennie nervously.

"You open the closet door," Samantha directed. "I'll stand here holding the pot, ready to strike

down whatever comes out." As they neared the closet, Samantha put her finger on her lips in warning. Silently, she stationed herself in front of the door. She held the pot up over her head with both hands, ready to do battle with whatever horror might emerge. "Ready," she whispered.

Jennie seized the knob. With a trembling hand, she pulled open the door. For a moment, they could see nothing but blackness inside. Then a shape suddenly leaped out of the shadows. With a loud, high-pitched snarl, it flung itself at Samantha, who immediately brought the pot down upon it.

There was a small thud, as the intruder fell to the floor. Then silence.

The girls looked down. In the failing light, they could make out the outline of a dark shape lying on the floor, very still

"It's so small!" exclaimed Jennie. She knelt down to get a closer look. "Oh, Samantha! It's only a kitten!"

"A kitten?" Samantha looked guiltily at the heavy weapon she still held. She put the pot on the floor and bent over the tiny creature. "I've killed it!" she wailed. "It was just a little kitten, and I've killed it."

"Wait!" Jennie cautioned as she placed her hand gently upon the soft body. "I think it's still alive. I can feel it breathing."

Jennie settled herself cross-legged on the floor. She cradled the kitten in her lap, stroking the smooth, silky fur. Samantha knelt beside her, watching silently. The kitten shuddered a few times and then regained consciousness.

"Meow!" It stood up and looked about. Then, apparently enjoying the warmth of Jennie's lap and the gentle stroking of her hand, it curled up into a purring ball of fluff on Jennie's lap.

"Thank goodness!" Samantha sighed loudly with relief. "It seems to be all right."

"It's adorable!" exclaimed Jennie, laying her cheek against the soft, furry body. "I wish I could keep it."

"Why can't you?" Samantha asked.

"It belongs to you, Samantha. We found it in your tree house."

"I can't possibly take it with me," Samantha smiled mysteriously. "So you keep it."

"Do you mean it? Thanks, Samantha!" The kitten purred contentedly on Jennie's lap.

Samantha suddenly leaped up. "Look how dark it's getting. We had best hurry."

The girls peered outside. It was almost dark. Quickly they scrambled down the tree, Jennie clutching the kitten close to her heart. When she was almost to the ground, Jennie remembered the pot.

"I left the pot in the tree house!"

"No, I have it," came Samantha's voice from below. She had already reached the safety of the ground. "Hurry, Jennie," she urged. "I cannot stay with you after dark."

They began to run through the woods, Samantha leading the way. It was growing darker by the minute. Only a dim glow flickered through the treetops. Jennie could not see the path at all. Her heart began to beat faster as she ran close behind Samantha, who seemed to know just where she was going, light or no light. Then they arrived at a section of the woods where the trees were dense and high and even the faint light disappeared. The blackness was total. Jennie could no longer see Samantha and was able to follow only by listening for the sound of the underbrush crunching beneath Samantha's feet. The branches above were gigantic black arms waiting to seize them.

The kitten struggled in Jennie's arms. She held on to it tightly, even when it scratched her with needle-sharp claws. Suddenly, it wriggled loose and leaped to the ground.

"Wait, Samantha!" called Jennie. "The kitten has got away." She knelt and felt all around, listening carefully to the direction from which little mewing sounds seemed to be coming. At last her hand touched something soft, and then Jennie had the tiny creature in her arms once more. The kitten was trembling all over.

"You silly kitty," scolded Jennie, stroking it gently. "I've got her, Samantha," she called.

There was no answer.

"Samantha?" Jennie called nervously.

Silence.

A sudden hard knot of terror began to tighten in Jennie's chest. Samantha must have gone on ahead. How could Jennie ever find the way alone? Desperately, she peered and squinted, trying in vain to pierce the darkness. She stood very still, clutching the kitten close to her heart. She seemed paralyzed by fear—unable to move from the spot. The wild pounding of her heart mingled with that of the kitten. One wrong step could lead her deeper into the unknown terror that the woods had become.

Then the silence was broken by a crunching sound. Footsteps in the underbrush! Someone or some*thing* was coming!

"Jennie?" Samantha's voice was like a ray of light breaking through the gloom.

"I'm here!" Jennie exclaimed with relief.

Samantha's warm, sure hand took hold of hers.

"Why did you stop following me?" demanded Samantha.

"I dropped the kitten. Didn't you hear me call you?"

"No," said Samantha. "I just realized after a while

that you weren't behind me. But come, now! You'd better hold onto my hand to make sure that doesn't happen again."

Hand in hand, the girls picked their way through the murky shadows. After a while the woods began to thin out. In a few minutes they were out of the woods completely and back on the Andrews property.

Samantha took her hand away. "I must hurry off now, Jennie. I'll come again tomorrow."

"Wait, Samantha! I want to ask you about a name for the kitten."

"A name?"

Jennie nodded. "I was wondering . . . well, would you mind if I named her for you—Samantha Junior?"

Samantha laughed. Even in the darkness, Jennie could see Samantha's eyes dancing with pleasure. "Of course I wouldn't mind. I'd be honored."

"Jennie, where are you? Jennie, is that you?" Jennie could hear her mother and father calling anxiously.

"I'm here," Jennie answered.

"Oh, Jennie!" Her mother ran toward her, quite out of breath. "Where have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you."

"You know you're not supposed to be out after dark!" scolded Mr. Andrews.

"I'm sorry." Jennie rushed to explain, the words tumbling out like unruly puppies. "Samantha and I have had such an adventure. We climbed her tree house and found a kitten and . . . but wait! Samantha will tell you." Jennie turned to where Samantha had been standing a moment before. She was no longer there.

"Samantha!" Jennie called loudly. There was no reply. "That's odd. She was right here."

"Well, she seems to have vanished now," re-

marked Mr. Andrews. "She must have gone home. Someone is probably worrying about her too."

"I'm sorry I worried you," Jennie apologized. She looked about again. "I wanted you to meet Samantha."

"You can invite her up to the house next time she comes," Mrs. Andrews suggested.

"She'll be here again tomorrow." Jennie's voice was bright with happiness. "And look!" She held up the kitten for their inspection. "Samantha said I could keep it. That is, if it's OK with you."

"I suppose so," Mrs. Andrews replied, peering at the creature. "Is it a boy or a girl kitten?"

"I don't know."

"Here. Let me see it." Mr. Andrews shone his flashlight on the kitten. Samantha Junior snarled.

"It's a female," Mr. Andrews announced.

"Good!" exclaimed Jennie. "Then her name fits."

"What is her name?" Mrs. Andrews inquired.

"Samantha Junior," Jennie replied with a smile. "After my best friend."

They walked back to the house, taking turns holding and petting the kitten. The lights of the house seemed to twinkle with a welcoming glow.

5
THE CAVE

Samantha Junior settled herself into the Andrews home as if she had always belonged there. The kitten was coal-black except for a snowy white patch on its chest. It had almond-shaped, glittering blue-green eyes, and its shiny black fur was softer than silk. When Jennie had first taken the kitten to her room, Samantha Junior had walked round and round the room as if she already considered it her domain.

Now where could Samantha Junior sleep? wondered Jennie. In the closet Jennie found a doll's playpen that hadn't been used in years. It was just the right size for Samantha Junior with enough room for the kitten to move about, yet snug enough to be cozy and secure. Jennie lined the bottom with a soft doll blanket. Then she put the kitten inside. Samantha Junior walked around the playpen once. Then she curled up on the blanket and closed her eyes.

"You clever darling!" exclaimed Jennie. "You know just what it's for!"

Jennie felt happy when she went to bed that night. She almost purred herself, looking at her kitten sleeping nearby and thinking about the marvelous adventure with her new friend. *Now I have a friend and a pet too*, she thought happily.

Early the next morning, Jennie was awakened by something brushing against her cheek. She opened her eyes to see Samantha Junior curled up on her pillow.

"You naughty kitten," scolded Jennie, but she spoke so tenderly that the kitten only purred, thinking it was being praised. Samantha Junior prowled the room, pouncing on sunbeams, while Jennie showered and dressed. Jennie hummed to herself. It was so nice to have the kitten there—almost like having another person in the room.

Jennie's mother and father smiled when she came down for breakfast, the little black kitten following close behind. Mrs. Andrews had put out a saucer of milk for Samantha Junior, who went straight to it and lapped it up greedily.

"Good morning, Mom! Good morning, Dad!" Jennie beamed.

"Someone seems happy this morning," Mrs. Andrews observed.

Jennie just smiled and helped herself to a heaping portion of cereal. She could feel Samantha Junior's furry little head rub against her ankle. The kitten went on to nuzzle Mr. Andrews and then Jennie's mother.

"Isn't she friendly!" exclaimed Jennie's mother.

"Not like her namesake," remarked Mr. Andrews.

"What do you mean, Daddy?"

"Your new friend did a quick disappearing act when we came along last night," Mr. Andrews answered.

"Oh, Phillip," Mrs. Andrews interjected. "I'm sure she was just anxious to get home."

"Of course, Daddy. After all, it was already dark."

"Did you say she was coming again today?" Mr. Andrews continued.

"Yes, Daddy. This afternoon," Jennie replied.

"Please bring her up to the house before you go off to play." Mr. Andrews spoke firmly.

"OK, Daddy," Jennie answered.

Suddenly Mrs. Andrews jumped up. "Jennie, be a dear and do the breakfast dishes. I've just had the most marvelous idea for the illustration I've been having trouble with."

Jennie cleared the table and washed the dishes, humming as she worked. It seemed like play to her. Her heart was light. Everywhere Jennie went that day, Samantha Junior followed. It was hard not to step on the little tagalong. The hours sped by. Then it was late afternoon again—time for Samantha's visit.

Jennie hurried to the rose garden with the kitten in her arms. Would her friend be there? A terrible thought occurred to Jennie. What if Samantha were just a dream—a figment of her imagination? But when Jennie reached the rose garden, Samantha was already there, looking lovely in a pink dress of shiny cotton. As always, a starched, white pinafore covered her dress. She was seated on one of the white benches, studying a tattered piece of paper. When she heard Jennie approaching, she stepped forward to greet her. "See how early and prompt I can be?" she exclaimed proudly. She looked Jennie over. "How lovely you look!"

Jennie was glad she had decided to not wear her usual pair of faded jeans. Her dress wasn't nearly as fine as Samantha's—just a plain blue cotton—but she felt quite feminine and dressed up.

"I'm glad you wore that today, Jennie. I'm going to introduce you to some friends of mine."

"I thought we were going to the cave."

"My friends are at the cave. We shall have a fine time." A secret smile flitted quickly across Samantha's face. Then she glanced at the kitten. "What a darling kitty."

"It's Samantha Junior."

"Who?"

"Samantha Junior! Don't you remember? She's the kitten we found in your tree house."

Samantha frowned and her forehead creased as if she were thinking hard. Then her face brightened. "Oh, yes. I remember now. And you named her for me, didn't you? But wasn't that a long time ago?"

Jennie stared at her. "It was just yesterday, Samantha!"

Samantha patted the kitten's furry neck. "Was it?" she murmured. "Oh, well, yes . . . uh . . . I guess so." She looked around uncertainly, then stood up straight. "Come on, let's get started! It's a long walk to the cave. Are you taking the kitten?"

"Can I?"

"Of course," Samantha said, glancing once again at the paper she had been studying. "This is my map to the cave. I made it when I discovered the cave the first time. Even though I've been there often, there are so many twistings and turnings that I always check my map first."

"Is it very far?"

"It takes about 20 minutes of fast walking. There!" Samantha looked up from the paper. "I really do know the way, but I like to make sure." Samantha folded the map and handed it to Jennie. "Put this in your pocket in case we are separated."

Jennie stuffed the map into her pocket and they started off through the woods. Almost at once, Jennie remembered something. "Wait a minute, Samantha." They stopped abruptly. "I told my parents. . . . " Jennie hesitated. "That is . . . wouldn't you like to come up to my house first and meet my mom and dad? I . . . I sort of told them you would."

Samantha's dark eyes flashed. "Why, Jennie! You knew we were planning to go to the cave today. There isn't enough time to go up to your house.

Besides," she smiled. "My friends are waiting for us."

"Maybe tomorrow?" suggested Jennie.

"We'll see." Samantha set off at full speed toward the deepest part of the woods. Jennie hurried behind, Samantha Junior in her arms.

They were on a path they had not traveled along before. The woods here were even thicker. Walking through the tangled underbrush was difficult. Jennie kept close behind Samantha, who, once again, marched with a sure step through the dense forest. All about them they could hear the sounds of wildlife, screeching and squawking angrily. After about 15 minutes they came upon a clearing where the ground was carpeted with a patchwork of brightly colored wild flowers. The late afternoon sun shone brightly here. Jennie could hear the sound of water trickling steadily somewhere close by.

"Are we there, Samantha?"

"It's just across the brook." Samantha glanced back at Jennie, her face lighted with a happy smile. "Wait till you see it, Jennie! You'll love it!"

A few more steps brought them to the edge of a narrow brook, where clear, rippling water traveled gently and melodically over the rocky bottom.

"We can cross on the big rocks that stick up out of the water," Samantha instructed. Holding up her skirt, she deftly picked her way across the brook. Jennie followed, balancing herself carefully on the largest rocks, holding Samantha Junior tightly.

"Here we are!" Samantha exclaimed, flinging her arms wide in a free and joyful gesture.

Jennie looked around, bewildered. "I don't see any cave." They were standing in another small clearing completely surrounded by large bushes and trees.

Samantha laughed with delight. "It's hidden be-

hind the bushes. That's why nobody else knows about it. I found it by accident one day when I was chasing a rabbit—right over there!" Samantha pointed to the far end of the clearing. "Come on!" She began to run to the spot she had indicated. Jennie followed closely behind.

"Look!" Samantha exclaimed as she pushed some branches aside.

Jennie gasped. Behind the bushes was a large rocky formation, at the front of which was the open mouth of a cave.

"Let's go in," Samantha continued as she climbed nimbly through the opening and vanished.

"Come on, Slowpoke!" Samantha's voice came muffled and distorted as though from a great distance. Jennie clutched Samantha Junior and cautiously entered the cave. Almost immediately she found herself facing a great darkness. She might just as well have stepped into a vast, bottomless pit. Jennie shivered and strained to see. Slowly, as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, Jennie saw Samantha standing right in front of her, laughing at her confusion.

Jennie looked around. They were standing at one end of a large, rectangular room. The walls were of rough, unevenly spaced rocks. The ceiling was so low that a grown-up would have had difficulty standing. Except for a large pile of black and white stones in one corner, the room was empty.

"It's a nice cave," said Jennie politely, feeling somewhat disappointed. "But where are your friends?"

"Oh, this is just the outer room," explained Samantha. "My real secret place is farther in, right through there." She indicated a small opening at the far end of the cave. "That is where my friends are."

Jennie followed Samantha across the cave. A

hollow-sounding echo followed each footstep. The small opening seemed to Jennie just large enough for a rabbit to pass through.

"Come on," directed Samantha. "We must crawl through here." She knelt down and wriggled through like a snake.

At that moment, Samantha Junior leaped out of Jennie's arms with a yowl and skittered madly across the room back to the cave entrance, where she sat down, meowing angrily, as if to say, "I'm not going in *there*."

"All right, scaredy-cat," scolded Jennie with a nervous laugh. "You stay here." Jennie scrambled into the opening through which Samantha had disappeared. As she came out on the other side, she gasped.

The inner room was smaller than the other and oval in shape. Jennie found, to her amazement, that she had stepped from darkness into light. The entire room was aglow with a shimmering white radiance that came from the walls. The ceiling was high, and it, too, glowed with that strange white brilliance. It was weirdly beautiful.

"It's fantastic!" Jennie exclaimed.

Samantha's face glowed with an unearthly chalky whiteness. "This is my secret place. You are the first living person to whom I've shown it." She took Jennie's hand and led her across the room. "Now you are going to meet my friends."

Jennie could hardly believe the incredible sight that now met her eyes. Propped up against the wall at the far end of the secret room were five tremendous paintings, each of a different life-size figure, so vivid and natural that they almost seemed to be alive. There was a man, tall and broad-shouldered, with firm, proud features, dressed in a waistcoat, breeches, riding boots, and a three-cornered hat. Next to him stood the portrait of a

sweet-faced woman wearing an elaborate low-cut gown with tremendous hoopskirts. Then came three solemn-faced children—two boys and a girl.

"Who are they?" Jennie inquired with great curiosity.

Samantha shrugged. "I don't know. I found them on the floor covered with dust and grime. I stood them up and cleaned them and gave them names. Now they are my friends. This is Mr. Fredericks." Samantha pointed to each in turn with a little curtsy. "And Mrs. Fredericks, John, Harry, and Sally."

"They are dressed so strangely," commented Jennie. "They look as if they could be from colonial times."

Samantha nodded. "I've thought of that too. It is possible. Did you know that this area was captured by the British during the American Revolution and the people had to hide their treasures and their guns? Look!"

Jennie had been so intent on examining the astounding paintings that she had failed to notice a large heap of metal in the corner. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a pile of rusty rifles. "I'll bet these things were hidden here during the Revolution!" exclaimed Jennie. "They must be valuable, especially the portraits. Haven't you told anybody else about them?"

"I told Ben, our gardener's boy, that I had found a cave, but I didn't say what was inside. These are my friends and I want to keep them." Samantha tossed her black curls.

"Do you have a gardener named Ben?" Jennie asked with surprise. "So do we! He must be one and the same. Isn't he a funny old fellow?"

"It must be someone else," retorted Samantha coldly. "Ben is just a little boy. His *father* is our gardener."

"But, Samantha. . . ." Jennie didn't have a chance to finish her sentence. There was a sudden roaring sound that filled their ears as if they were inside a thunder cloud. The room began to shake violently. The girls screamed and tried to grab each other, but they were thrown to the floor as the room convulsed and shifted. Then the turbulence stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The disturbance had not lasted more than a minute.

"Are you all right, Jennie?" Samantha asked anxiously.

"I think so." Jennie sat up and brushed the dust from her dress. "What happened?"

"I . . . I'm not sure. Nothing like this has ever occurred before. Perhaps . . . oh, Jennie, look!"

Samantha pointed to the opening through which they had crawled just a few minutes earlier. But there was no opening now—it had been sealed up with rocks.

"There must have been a cave-in," said Samantha.

"We're trapped!" wailed Jennie. "How will we ever get out?"

"I . . . I don't know," mumbled Samantha, looking bewildered. "Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"Is there another way out?" asked Jennie.

"N . . . No." Samantha shook her head. "I know every inch of this cave and it is solid rock all around. I never thought of the possibility of a cave-in. Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"Stop saying that!" exclaimed Jennie irritably. "You sound like a broken record. Maybe it never happened before, but it's happening now. We've got to find a way out."

Now Jennie hardly recognized her friend. The bold, adventurous Samantha was gone and in her place was a frightened little girl. In some odd way,

Samantha's weakness seemed to make Jennie stronger. She immediately set to work examining the room for a possible escape route. The bright glow made her search easy and quick—but it was fruitless. Samantha was right. There was no other way out. Then Jennie went back to inspect the spot where the original opening had been. From a distance it had seemed to be completely blocked, but upon closer examination, Jennie found a tiny opening, not much larger than the thickness of her hand.

"Look, Samantha," she called. "Perhaps we can enlarge this opening."

Samantha hurried over. "How?"

"By loosening some of the rocks around it," Jennie answered, as she thrust her hand through the hole. Sure enough, she was able to pull loose the rock directly under it.

"Let me help!" Samantha pulled away a rock above the opening, but to their dismay, the upper rocks began to shift and then settled down around the opening until it was even smaller than it had been before.

The girls studied the blocked-up opening. "If we just loosen the rocks below," suggested Jennie, "maybe the upper ones won't move." She was just able to fit her hand into the opening. Carefully she removed first one, then another of the rocks below.

"You're doing it!" encouraged Samantha. "That's the way."

Working with extreme caution, they moved more rocks, one by one. Their progress was slow, but eventually they had enlarged the opening to a point where it was just about big enough to crawl through.

"Go ahead, Samantha," said Jennie. "Climb through."

Samantha hesitated. "What if I disturb the upper rocks and the opening closes again? You go first, Jennie. You might get trapped here forever."

"So might you, Samantha," Jennie pointed out. "So you go first."

"Oh, no, Jennie! Nothing could happen to *me* here."

"What do you mean?" Jennie inquired with great curiosity.

"It just couldn't. I can't explain. You are the only one in danger. Go through first."

"What a strange thing to say, Samantha. You're in as much danger as I am," Jennie added, with concern in her voice.

"No, I'm not, Jennie." Samantha's eyes were round and luminous in the eerie light. "Please!" she begged. "Don't argue with me. Just go!"

"But, Samantha . . ."

"Go!" Samantha shoved Jennie toward the opening.

"I don't understand . . . well, all right. But you come right behind me. Don't wait for anything."

"I'll be fine," Samantha told her. "I'm not afraid for myself. It's you I'm concerned about. That's why I've been so confused. I feel responsible for you. But you were wonderful, Jennie. You really took charge. I was proud of you. Now go!" She gave Jennie another push. Reluctantly, Jennie began to climb through the opening. She moved slowly and carefully, trying not to disturb the rocks above her. Then, with a thump, she fell over and landed on her back. She was safe in the outer room. At the same time, there was a low, rumbling noise. *The opening*, Jennie thought, with alarm. She got up, but could not see a thing in the darkness. Peering and squinting, she was just able to make out her surroundings. She looked for the hole through

which she had crawled. It was blocked again with rocks, and this time there was not even a small opening.

"*Samantha!*" Jennie screamed.

"Here I am," Samantha answered reassuringly. "I was right behind you. I got out just before the hole closed."

Samantha was standing beside her. Jennie was so relieved that she began to cry.

Samantha hugged her. "What a silly goose you are. You've been brave enough for both of us, and now that we're safe, you cry."

It *was* silly to weep now that they were safe, Jennie concluded. Her tears turned to laughter and hand in hand the two girls emerged from the cave to find Samantha Junior placidly licking her paws. Jennie scooped her up and the girls began to run toward home. Samantha stopped only once.

"Oh, Jennie!" she exclaimed. "I never did get to show you the bones!"

6
MORE SUMMER DAYS

Jennie's parents found the story of her cave adventure a bit difficult to believe.

"Jennie, are you sure that all this really happened?" asked her father. "After all, you do have a vivid imagination."

"Daddy!" Jenny was indignant. "I wouldn't make up a thing like this."

"And what about your friend Samantha?" Mr. Andrews persisted. "We've never even seen her. Why doesn't she come to play with you earlier in the day? Then there would be time to visit."

"She can't come earlier."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"That seems strange."

"She'll meet you tomorrow. I know she will!" declared Jennie.

Jennie was determined now that Samantha should meet her parents, but the next day in the rose garden when she suggested it, Samantha tossed her curls and refused.

"I couldn't possibly. I'm not dressed properly. I would be ashamed to meet your mama and papa in this old thing." Samantha glanced down at her dress, a plain, dark cotton frock, minus the usual white apron. It wasn't as pretty as her other dresses

but it was certainly more presentable than the ragged jeans Jennie usually wore. More presentable—but terribly old-fashioned. Jennie had often wanted to ask Samantha about the way she dressed. But something held her back—a feeling that Samantha would be offended. Perhaps it was the way Samantha stiffened—the cold glaze that shadowed her eyes every time Jennie questioned her too closely. No, Jennie could not ask Samantha about those clothes—so pretty, yet so odd. As a matter of fact, Jennie wasn't wearing her jeans so much anymore. They made her feel messy next to Samantha. This morning she had put on a sundress that had been hanging in her closet for months.

Jennie argued and pleaded, but Samantha would not budge. It would be just too humiliating for her to meet Mr. and Mrs. Andrews while she was looking so tacky. When Jennie returned home that evening, her father gave her a long, hard look.

Samantha came to play with Jennie every day, but each time she found a different excuse for not going up to the house. Either she wanted to show Jennie a favorite place that was quite a distance away or she wanted to play a marvelous game that would take up all their time or she was improperly dressed or she had to leave early or . . . or . . . or! She always managed to come up with an excuse. Some of her excuses seemed extremely weak to Jennie, but she was afraid to offend Samantha. When Jennie remembered the long, lonely days before Samantha had come into her life, the possibility of losing her friend was too horrible to bear. So she accepted Samantha's excuses and put up with her parents' questioning.

Deep in her heart, however, Jennie had to admit that her parents had good reason to think there was something strange about Samantha—and they

didn't even know about the many odd things she had said and done. For instance, there was the time Jennie had taken two easels, paper, and watercolors out to the rose garden and was teaching Samantha to paint. After she had demonstrated how to mix the paints and apply them, Jennie had said, "I'm going to paint a picture of my house. Why don't you do yours?" When they had finished and put their pictures side by side, Jennie was astonished to see that they had painted the same house.

"Why did you paint my house?" Jennie demanded.

"But this is a picture of *my* house!" declared Samantha.

"How can that be?" challenged Jennie. "There's no other house like this around here. I remember the agent telling that to my parents."

"Nevertheless, it is my house!" insisted Samantha.

Nevertheless! That was another peculiar thing about Samantha. She spoke so precisely and used words that Jennie had read in books but wouldn't think of using in conversation. They sounded so *old-fashioned*, just like Samantha's clothes. Her long, full skirts and starched white pinafores and the funny, coarse stockings she always wore gave her a uniquely quaint appearance.

Then there was the day that Ben, the gardener, had come upon them in the rose garden. Ben came every Tuesday and Friday to "do the grounds," as he put it. Jennie had grown very fond of Ben. She would follow him about, helping to pull weeds, chattering away. Ben didn't talk much except for an occasional "humpf" or "yup" or "ayuh," but he was an excellent listener. Jennie talked and talked and talked, and Ben listened. He seemed interested in Samantha and was even inspired from time to time to utter a complete sentence about her. "Sure like

to meet thet gal," he remarked more than once. But since he arrived early in the morning and left early in the afternoon, the opportunity didn't come for a long time.

One Friday afternoon, Ben stayed late to finish up some fertilizing ahead of the rain that had been forecast for the following day. Jennie did not know that Ben was still around. She had eaten dinner and then run out to the rose garden to meet Samantha.

They were playing with dolls. Samantha had brought her favorite, a beautiful, almost life-size doll with large, dark eyes and long black hair—much like Samantha herself. Jennie was intent on fitting a coat on her doll while Samantha stalked about behind a rose bush, pretending to search for a lost child. Ben entered the rose garden with his spade and a bag of fertilizer.

"Gotta fertilize some of these droopy roses," Ben explained.

Jennie jumped up, dropping her doll. "Oh, Ben, I'm so glad you're here. Now you can meet Samantha."

The bright eyes in the wrinkled face sparkled with interest.

"Samantha! Samantha!" Jennie called. "Come and meet Ben."

There was no answer. Jennie called again and again, but Samantha did not reply.

"She's shy," explained Jennie. "I'll get her and explain that you won't eat her up."

She skipped behind the yellow bush where Samantha had been playing. "Come out, you silly girl," she teased.

An empty silence greeted her. Jennie was alone behind the yellow rose bush. On the ground lay Samantha's doll. Jennie scooped it up and picked her way through the bushes calling, "Samantha! Samantha!" But there was no reply. When she

stepped back into the clearing, Ben was kneeling beside a red rose bush, spading fertilizer into the soil.

"She's gone!" Jennie was confused. "She was here a minute ago, but now she's gone."

Nothing seemed to surprise Ben. "Yup," was his only comment.

"But she was right here," insisted Jennie. "See, here's her doll."

Ben shrugged.

The next day, Samantha appeared at the usual time. She showed Jennie a bandaged finger and explained that she had pricked herself on the rose bush and left hurriedly because she thought that a thorn was stuck in her finger. She was glad to get her doll back. "I missed her," she crooned, holding the doll's head close to her own. "I hate to be without her for such a terribly long time."

"It's only been a day," Jennie pointed out. Samantha looked vague and did not reply.

In her heart, Jennie had to admit that Samantha was strange. Yet Jennie loved her. Samantha was cheerful and adventurous. She knew every inch of the woods and the surrounding country and she led Jennie to all kinds of interesting spots. She became stubborn only when Jennie suggested meeting her parents or pointed out one of Samantha's frequent lapses of memory. Samantha always seemed to be confused about time. She found it difficult to remember what she said from day to day and she often contradicted herself. At times she acted as if she thought yesterday were a month or even years ago. She didn't like to be confronted with her mistakes, and occasionally she flared up in anger. But these times were more than balanced by her usual gentleness and sweetness.

The girls' visit to the cave had been so terrifying that neither wanted to go there again. But they

spent a lot of time in the tree house, playing and talking and listening to the sounds of the woods. One afternoon in late August they were sitting on the floor of the tree house embroidering. Jennie had never embroidered before. Samantha was shocked that a girl could reach the ripe old age of ten without having learned to embroider. She had brought along an extra embroidery kit with two hoops and several napkins and lots of brightly colored thread. She taught Jennie how to do a chain stitch, and they each chose a napkin to work on. Samantha's needle flew, but Jennie's went more slowly. Jennie enjoyed the work. Little by little, the flower she was embroidering began to take shape.

Suddenly Jennie shivered. Her bare arms were prickled with cold. The late afternoons and evenings were becoming cooler—a hint of the fall season soon to come. "I'll wear a sweater tomorrow," remarked Jennie.

"Poor Jennie." Samantha was wearing a full-skirted dress with long sleeves and a high neck.

The change in weather reminded Jennie of school. "School will open in a week and a half," she commented. "I'm so excited—and nervous too. It's going to be strange—going to a new school. I'd really be upset if I didn't know that you were going to be there too."

Samantha bent closer to her work, hiding her face.

Jennie chattered on. "I really liked my old school. It was great. I knew all the kids and most of the teachers. But here! Tell me, Samantha, do you like it? Is it a nice school?"

Samantha looked up. Jennie was astonished to see two large tears rolling down Samantha's cheeks.

"What's the matter, Samantha?"

Samantha put down her work and covered her face with her hands. "I won't be going to school with you."

Jennie's eyes widened with disbelief. "Why not?"

"I—I just can't, that's all."

"But why not?" Jennie insisted. "I don't understand."

"I—I can't. I'm only here with you for the summer."

Jennie was confused. Samantha was being even more mysterious than usual. "But don't you live in this town?"

"Not exactly. That is . . . I do, but I don't." Samantha had risen and was pacing. She didn't seem to know how to continue.

"You do but you don't?" Jennie was confused.

Samantha knelt beside Jennie and took her hand. "Look at me, Jennie."

Jennie looked. Samantha seemed calmer. Her eyes were clear and her face glowed with a dewy radiance. "Jennie, you won't need me once you start school. You'll meet the other girls then and make new friends. *I came this summer only because you needed me.*"

Jennie shook her head. "I don't understand," she wailed. "You must go to school. Everyone does." An idea suddenly struck her. "Do you go to a private school?"

Samantha sighed. "I suppose that you could say that." And she would say nothing further on the subject.

Jennie didn't press her. She was, in a way, satisfied to accept this explanation. Private school was something she could understand. But when she left Samantha that evening and went home, Samantha's words kept ringing in her ears.

I came this summer only because you needed me!

It was then that Jennie remembered what Samantha had said on the very first day she had come to play: *Did you not call me?*

That evening Jennie's parents were relaxing in the living room. Mrs. Andrews noticed imme-

diately that her daughter was upset. "What's the matter?" she asked gently. "Did you and Samantha have a fight?"

Jennie flew into her mother's arms and burst into tears. "Oh, Mom! Samantha's going away. She's not going to school with me."

Jennie's mother hugged her and smoothed back a lock of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes. "Where is Samantha going?"

"I'm not sure!" wailed Jennie. "I think maybe to a private school . . . but she was so vague about it."

"That sounds like your Samantha," said Mr. Andrews, raising his eyebrows.

Despite her father's gentle sarcasm, all the attention she was getting made Jennie feel better. She moved out of the protective circle of her mother's arms and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Samantha does say odd things," she admitted. "I just don't understand her." Jennie felt disloyal talking about her friend. But she was confused, and she felt a need to discuss it with her parents. "Samantha said that she came only because I needed her and that now I won't need her anymore so she can go away."

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews exchanged worried glances. "I think," Mr. Andrews said, "it's time we met this mysterious friend of yours. She's eluded us long enough. Do you expect her tomorrow?"

"Yes," Jennie answered softly.

"Then tomorrow we'll all go out to the garden to welcome her," Mr. Andrews announced firmly.

The following afternoon found all three members of the Andrews clan in the rose garden.

"It's pretty here," commented Mrs. Andrews, sitting on one of the white metal benches. "I think I'll come here tomorrow morning to paint. These lovely roses won't last much longer."

Jennie agreed with her.

"Where is Samantha?" demanded Mr. Andrews. They had been waiting for more than half an hour. Samantha usually arrived long before this time. Jennie's eyes darted about anxiously, searching for Samantha in every bend of a branch or flutter of a leaf. As they waited, a realization slowly came to Jennie.

"Samantha won't be coming," she said suddenly. Her voice was flat and final.

"You said you were expecting her," Mr. Andrews replied impatiently.

"I was." Jennie looked down uncomfortably. She couldn't face her parents' questioning gaze. "But now I know she won't come."

"Why not?" her father pressed on.

"Because she comes only when I'm alone."

"Is that what she told you?" inquired Mrs. Andrews.

"No, not in exactly those words," Jennie admitted. "But I can see now that's what she meant."

"But why?" Mr. Andrews persisted. His curiosity was growing.

Jennie shrugged. "I don't know. There are things about Samantha I don't understand."

Mr. Andrews puffed on his pipe. "How would she know before she shows up that we're here?"

"That's right!" echoed his wife. "We would have heard anyone approaching nearby even if she had seen us and turned back."

Jennie laughed. "Not Samantha! You never hear Samantha coming. There's a breeze and a flutter and then she appears."

"I never heard of such a thing!" Mrs. Andrews concluded looking puzzled. Jennie's father just shook his head.

"We might as well go home," Jennie told them. "Samantha won't be coming today."

It was September 1. Just one week of summer vacation remained. Then school would open, and Samantha would go away.

Jennie was still the only one who had seen her.

7

GOOD-BYE, SAMANTHA

The last day of vacation Samantha appeared in the rose garden wearing an extraordinary outfit.

"You look beautiful, Samantha!" exclaimed Jennie. "Are you going to a party?"

Samantha looked like a young girl in a picture—an old-fashioned one. She wore a crisp white organdy dress with three billowing skirts, each a little longer than the other so that they formed tiers. A wide blue-satin ribbon encircled her waist, tied in back with a large bow. A matching ribbon was wound through her long, black curls.

"This is how I should like you to remember me," said Samantha softly. She sat on one of the metal benches, carefully smoothing out her snow-white skirt. "You look pretty, too, Jennie," she said generously, beckoning Jennie to sit beside her. Jennie seldom wore her sloppy old jeans anymore. She was dressed in a yellow cotton dress her mother had made for her at the beginning of the summer, over Jennie's loud objections. Now she liked it.

"I love this garden." Samantha sighed. "I shall always remember it as my favorite spot, even more so since I met you." The rose garden had changed. Where once there had been red, yellow, and pink roses making the air heavy with a sweet, rich scent, now only a few straggly blossoms remained. In the world of roses, summer had ended.

It was ending for Samantha and Jennie too.

Jennie took Samantha's hand. She was astonished to find it cold, although the day was warm. She felt Samantha shiver.

"Are you cold?"

Samantha shook her head. "I am just sad that we must part."

"Then stay!" begged Jennie. "Ask your father if you can go to school here in town. He's so good to you. Surely, he'll let you stay if you want to so badly."

"My father?" Samantha's pretty features were suddenly distorted by that vague, confused expression that Jennie had come to dread. "My father?" Samantha's voice seemed to come from a distance. "Papa?" She frowned in an effort to remember. "But I . . . I don't know where he is . . . it was so long ago. . . ."

Her voice trailed off.

"Whatever do you mean?" whispered Jennie.

Samantha shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she seemed her old self. She smiled. "I just mean that it is not possible, Jennie dear. It was very, very unusual for me to have come at all."

This was too much. Jennie dropped Samantha's hand and jumped up. "Who are you, anyway, Samantha?"

"I'm Samantha." The dark eyes were wide and innocent.

"Samantha *who?* What's your last name? You've never even told me!"

"Samantha Talbot. You never asked."

"Oh!" Jennie sat down again. Somehow she had almost expected Samantha not to have a last name. *Now I'm the one who's acting strangely,* she thought. But she continued the cross-examination.

"Where do you live?"

"Here."

"Here? Do you mean in Phillipstown?" Jennie asked.

"Yes."

"Then where is your house?" Jennie demanded.

"Very close by."

"But my house is the only one close by!" Jennie continued.

"Oh, Jennie!" Samantha got up suddenly. She took Jennie's hand and drew her to her feet. "Don't spoil our last day. Don't ask any more questions. Please. Please! Haven't we had lovely times together? Haven't we?"

"Yes," Jennie finally said sadly.

"Then let us always remember each other like that. Having happy times! Let's play! I know—we can play hide-and-seek." Samantha laughed and, with a swift movement, skipped away.

"Find me if you can," she called over her shoulder, and disappeared into the bushes. Only the echo of her laughter remained.

"Samantha!" Jennie dashed into the bushes, searching frantically. "Samantha!" Icy fingers seemed to clutch at Jennie's heart. Samantha was gone. Jennie would never see her again. Then Jennie caught sight of something still and white behind a bush. She rushed toward it. There was Samantha, placidly sitting cross-legged on the grass, nibbling a red berry.

"You found me too quickly," pouted Samantha. "Now it is your turn to hide."

Relief flooded over Jennie. She laughed happily, and the game continued. Jennie hid, then Samantha, then Jennie, then Samantha, and so on. But each time, it took a little longer for Jennie to find Samantha, and each time that same feeling of panic

gripped Jennie. Time and again she was overwhelmed with relief when she finally sighted the white figure.

Jennie looked up at the gathering dusk. "We'd better stop playing. It's almost dark."

"One more time!" begged Samantha. "It's my turn to hide once more." She gazed at Jennie intently. "I love you, Jennie." Like a flash of quicksilver, Samantha darted off behind the bushes.

"Samantha?"

Jennie's call rang hollow and empty. A great silence seemed to have descended over the rose garden. Not a breeze stirred; not a bird twittered; not a leaf moved. Jennie's voice was like the insignificant cry of a bird alone in a great bottomless valley.

"Samantha!" The name hung like an echo in the stagnant atmosphere.

Jennie, who had been frozen to the spot, suddenly leaped into action. She dashed into the bushes behind which Samantha had disappeared. She ran here, there, everywhere, searching frantically. She looked in every possible spot—in the rose garden, through the gardens beyond, even in the adjoining woods, then back to the rose garden again.

"Samantha!" Again and again, Jennie's anxious cry rang out. She peered behind every rose bush, heedless of the thorns that pricked her arms and legs. The knot in her chest rose into her throat and overflowed into an avalanche of tears.

"Samantha! Samantha! Where are you?" Suddenly, Jennie caught sight of something white behind one of the bushes. It shone in the spreading darkness. Jennie rushed toward it. But it was just a small piece of gossamer cloth, clinging to the bush.

"Her dress must have caught on the bush as she passed by," murmured Jennie. Carefully, she re-

moved the material from the sharp thorn. She held it gently in her hands, stroking it. At that moment, something brushed against Jennie's ankle, and she heard a low purring sound. Jennie glanced down. There was her little kitten looking up at her with bright green eyes. *I'm still here*, it seemed to be saying. Still holding the torn cloth in her hand, Jennie picked up the kitten. "Oh, Samantha Junior!" she wailed.

Slowly, Jennie walked back to the clearing and sank miserably onto one of the benches. She laid the dress fragment next to her cheek and held Samantha Junior tightly to her chest. These were all that remained of Samantha. Jennie threw herself down on the bench and cried bitterly. The kitten sat near, nuzzling Jennie's wet face.

When Jennie failed to return home after dark, her father went looking for her. He found her in the rose garden, still lying on the bench, sobbing. Clutched tightly in one of Jennie's hands was a scrap of white cloth.

"Jennie?" Mr. Andrews called.

Jennie looked up. Her eyes were red and swollen. Her face was tear-stained.

"Samantha is gone," Jennie cried.

Mr. Andrews paused in the stillness. He looked around. For a moment, he thought he had heard something—a whisper, a call. He shook his head. It couldn't be anything but the late-summer breeze rustling the leaves of the rose bushes.

Gently, Jennie's father helped her to her feet. He put his arm around Jennie and led her, still sobbing, back to the house. The kitten followed.

8
NEW FRIENDS

Samantha did not come again. And some inner knowledge told Jennie that she never would.

Jennie's mother and father helped her search for a solution to the mystery of Samantha. They looked through the telephone directories of all the nearby communities for the name *Talbot*, but none was listed. They even inquired of the real estate broker who had sold them the house, an elderly gentleman named Mr. Hardy. He scratched his head and said that the name had a familiar ring to it but he couldn't imagine why because he could not think of a single family in the district by that name.

The next day school opened.

Phillipstown School was a lovely old brick building covered with ivy. Inside, it had been completely renovated and brought up to date so that the classrooms were bright and cheerful. Despite her unhappiness about Samantha's disappearance, a small glow of excitement had begun to burn within Jennie. Her teacher, a pleasant-faced young woman with a warm, kindly manner, was named Miss Falco. She gave Jennie special attention and urged the other students to extend a welcoming hand to the new girl.

Jennie's new classmates, however, did not set any records in racing to welcome her. Jennie had fanta-

sies of being showered with invitations and offers of friendship, but that did not happen. Her classmates were polite, but cautious.

Miss Falco, who didn't seem to miss a thing that went on in her classroom, was optimistic and encouraging. "Be patient, Jennie," she advised. "They'll come around."

Miss Falco was right. After a while Jennie began to find herself occasionally included in afterschool activities. One girl in particular took a liking to Jennie and Jennie to her. Beth Phillips, a small, bright-eyed blonde who sat next to Jennie in class, stopped her as she was leaving the building the second week of school.

"When are you going to the library to get a book for the report that's due next week?" she asked.

"I don't know." Jennie hesitated. She didn't want to seem stupid. "I don't even know where the library is," she finally confessed, suddenly trusting the friendliness in Beth's sky-colored eyes.

"Why don't you come with me?" suggested Beth. "I'm going over there this afternoon."

"I'd love to," Jennie replied cheerfully. A warm glow spread through Jennie from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

"OK, it's settled then," Beth answered, smiling. "I have to go home first, but I'll come get you in about half an hour."

"Great! I live at 205 Oak," Jennie added.

"I know," replied Beth. "My grandmother used to live in that house."

"She did?" Jennie was amazed. "Where does she live now?"

"She died two years ago. At first we thought we might move over there since my mother inherited the house, but Mom decided it was too old and too big and too far away from everything. She likes the house we live in now. So the old place was put up

for sale. It took a while to sell it. Not too many people want big old houses now. But I guess you people do, because your family bought it."

"My parents like space and privacy," explained Jennie. "They're both artists who work at home."

"Oh!" Beth exclaimed. She seemed impressed. "Well, so long for now, Jennie. I'll see you in a little while."

Jennie floated home on a cloud. The first week of school the walk home had seemed endless. Today home could have been just around the corner. Jennie had grown wings.

She flew into the house and found her mother in the studio, painting.

"I'm going to the library with Beth Phillips," Jennie exclaimed breathlessly. "She sits next to me in class and her grandmother used to live in our house and she's going to show me where the library is so I can do my book report." The words tumbled out. Almost immediately, Jennie dashed away again, leaving the astonished Mrs. Andrews open-mouthed, brush poised in midair.

Jennie's father was in the kitchen, raiding the refrigerator, when Jennie whirled in like a tornado. She grabbed a firm, red apple and bit into it.

"Hi, Dad!" Jennie's words were garbled by the apple in her mouth. "I gotta hurry. I'm going to the library with Beth Phillips. She sits next to me in class and her grandmother used to live in this house!" In a flash Jennie was gone, leaving her father as mystified as her mother had been.

Jennie reached the front door just in time to see Beth getting out of a car and walking up the path.

"Hi," said Beth. "My mother was on her way to visit a friend so she dropped me off. Are you ready? It's a long walk back to town."

"Wait a minute," came a voice behind Jennie. Mrs. Andrews had followed Jennie out. Jennie in-

troduced her to Beth. Mrs. Andrews greeted Jennie's new friend cautiously.

"My mom's over there if you want to talk to her." Beth pointed to the car, which had not yet pulled away. Mrs. Andrews walked down the path. The girls watched their mothers converse.

"Is it OK?" called Jennie impatiently. "May I go?"

Mrs. Andrews looked back and nodded, and the girls set out. They walked a short distance in silence. Jennie was thinking that Beth had lived here a long time and probably knew everybody. "Beth," she finally asked. "Do you know a girl named Samantha Talbot?"

"Samantha?" Beth seemed interested. "It seems to me I've heard that name somewhere. Where does she live?"

"Here in Phillipstown. Not far from me, I think."

Beth laughed. "That's impossible," she said. "I know everyone in town. My family's been here for generations. My daddy's great-great-grandfather founded this town. It's named after him—*Phillipstown*. My mother's family's been here forever too. I told you. They used to live in your house. There's no Samantha here."

"You might not know her because she goes to a private school," offered Jennie.

Beth shook her head. "That wouldn't make any difference. I'd know her, all right. What did you say her last name was?"

"Talbot."

"That's strange." A puzzled expression crossed Beth's soft, pert features. "Talbot was a name in our family a long time ago. I think it was my grandmother's name before she was married. That's the grandmother who lived in your house. But there are no more Talbots in Phillipstown."

A ridiculous thought occurred to Jennie. "What

was your grandmother's first name?" she asked.

"H-m, let me see." Beth spoke thoughtfully. "I've heard it lots of times. H-m. . . oh, I remember! Her first name was Anne."

Of course, thought Jennie. *What a stupid, loony thought it had been.*

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Beth, coming to a dead stop. "Now I remember."

"What?"

"I know where I've heard the name *Samantha* before. There was a Samantha in our family a long time ago. Let me see. . . ." Beth frowned in an effort to remember. "I think I remember hearing that Grandma had a sister—a half sister, really—who died young. Grandma's mother was her father's second wife. The sister who died as a child was the daughter of his first wife. I'm almost sure that girl's name was Samantha."

An icy shiver passed over Jennie. "That means that her last name was Talbot."

"Right!" Beth nodded her head. "Samantha Talbot. I remember the story now. It's real sad. Samantha's mother died when Samantha was little, and Samantha herself died not long after. She wasn't much older than we are now. She was so pretty too."

Jennie's eyes widened. "How do you know that?"

"From her picture," Beth answered matter-of-factly.

"You have a picture of her?" Jennie hardly dared to hope.

"In the family album," replied Beth. "That's how I know her story. I saw her picture one day—oh, a long time ago—and asked my mother about her. I haven't thought about it in years. Isn't it odd that you should know a girl named Samantha Talbot!"

"Yes," Jennie replied. She felt numb.

"Of course," continued Beth, "it's just a coincidence."

The conversation was interrupted just then by their arrival at the library. Inside, the girls became absorbed in the job at hand. Jennie asked for an application for a library card to take home for her parents to sign. Meantime, Beth said Jennie could check out her books on Beth's card. When both girls had chosen their books and checked them out, Beth accompanied Jennie back home. They spent the rest of the afternoon becoming better acquainted. They spoke about school and friends and TV shows they both liked. Nothing further was said of Beth's grandmother's tragic sister or her mysterious namesake until Beth was ready to leave.

"Why don't you come over to my house tomorrow, Jennie? I'll show you the family album and you can see the photograph of Samantha Talbot."

"OK," Jennie answered. She was thrilled.

"Can you walk home with me right from school?" Beth asked.

"Sure," Jennie agreed. "I know it'll be fine with my folks."

"That's great! So long."

"Bye, Beth," Jennie called after her new friend. "Thanks for showing me the library."

Beth was almost out the door when she turned around. "Oh, Jennie! I forgot the most important thing. I belong to a club with a few other girls. You know them—they're in our class. Dorothy Cantrell, Jean Mancini, and Angela Newman. Anyway, I spoke to them about you, and we all agreed that we'd like you to join our club. What do you think?"

Jennie's heart swelled. She knew the girls Beth had mentioned and she liked them. "I'd love to!" she declared.

"Great!" said Beth. "I'll tell you more about it tomorrow. Good-bye."

Jennie stood quietly near the door after Beth had closed it behind her. Joy swept over her.

They wanted her!

She was going to be part of a crowd again, just as in the old days. They really wanted her!

In a daze of happiness, Jennie strolled outside. Although she hadn't been conscious of heading in that direction, Jennie found herself in the rose garden. It was late afternoon—the time of day when she had always met Samantha. The sky was theatening rain. Only a few dim rays of sun penetrated the large black cloud that hung overhead. Several straggly roses still bloomed, sending out just a hint of that heavy sweet scent that was peculiar to this spot. Except for a slight breeze whispering through the branches, all was still.

Jennie stood alone in the garden. A peculiar sensation slowly crept over her, making her skin prickle. She had the oddest feeling that someone else was there.

"Samantha?" she called uncertainly.

There was no answer, no sound other than the whistling of the wind in the leaves.

"Samantha?" she called again.

No reply.

What nonsense, thought Jennie. *Samantha is away at a private school. Or is she?* Jennie thought about that other Samantha . . . the little girl of long ago . . . Beth's grandmother's sister who had never grown up. That child had lived in this house and played in this very garden such a long time ago. What had she looked like? Jennie's mind fashioned an image of her friend Samantha . . . the old-fashioned dresses she wore . . . her odd, precise way of speaking . . . and the strange, incomprehensible things she sometimes said.

Nobody but Jennie had ever seen her!

"Samantha?" Jennie questioned the unseen presence. She turned around quickly, certain now that someone else was there, just behind her. But her eyes found nothing.

"Meow." A soft, furry head rubbed against Jennie's ankle. Jennie picked up Samantha Junior and held her close. With the kitten in her arms, she walked slowly back to the house. With mingled excitement and dread, she thought about tomorrow, when she would see the photograph of the long-dead Samantha Talbot.

9

WHO IS SAMANTHA?

Beth Phillips lived in a new section of town in a gleaming, modern, ranch-style house. Jennie was reminded of the house in which she had lived before the move to Phillipstown. There was the same noise and activity. Children were arriving home from school, shouting to their friends and slamming doors. A few preschoolers rode their tricycles up and down the sidewalks, while their mothers chatted. It was exactly the sort of atmosphere Jennie loved. What a contrast to the quiet and seclusion of Jennie's new home!

Beth's mother was waiting for them in the kitchen. She greeted Jennie warmly and served the girls a generous snack of milk and cake at the breakfast bar.

"I hear you're interested in our family history," Mrs. Phillips commented. She was a bright, cheerful woman and her kitchen was warm with the aroma of good food.

"I guess it's just because I live in your family's old home," explained Jennie.

Mrs. Phillips bustled about the kitchen, peeking into pots and stirring here and there. Heavenly smells drifted across the room. "Beth tells me that you know a girl named Samantha Talbot," she remarked.

"Yes," confessed Jennie. "But she's away at a private school."

"Did you say that she lives in Phillipstown?" Mrs. Phillips continued.

"Yes. She was just home for the summer," Jennie replied.

Mrs. Phillips' reaction was exactly the same as her daughter's had been. She shook her head. "That's impossible! There no longer are any Talbots in Phillipstown."

Beth rushed to defend her new friend. "Maybe there's a new family in town, not related to us at all. After all, our ancestors weren't the only Talbots in the world."

"It's possible, I suppose," Mrs. Phillips admitted. "But how strange that she should have one of our old family names—Samantha."

"She might be a distant relative," suggested Beth. She jumped down from the stool. "Come on, Jennie. Let's go see if my Samantha has any resemblance to yours."

Beth led Jennie to the den and pulled an oversized photograph album from a shelf. "I think her picture is in this one," she said as she spread the album open on the rug. The two girls sprawled out to examine it. The book was very old. The cover was worn and discolored, and many of the photographs inside were brown and faded. As they turned the pages, a musty, spicy odor floated up.

"Here it is!" exclaimed Beth.

Jennie peered eagerly. Looking up at her across the years was the faded image of a young girl wearing a checked dress and white pinafore. *It's like the dress Samantha wore the first time she came to play with me!* Jennie remembered that day clearly. She had been so lonely and miserable. Then Samantha had come. The words she had spoken then echoed in Jennie's mind—"*Did you not call me!*"

Jennie examined the photograph closely. The girl posed stiffly, her arms at her side. She ap-

peared to be in a garden. *The rose garden?* Her hair was dark and curly. But her face! Here the photograph had faded badly. Only a blurry outline remained. It was impossible to know from the photograph just what the girl had looked like.

"It's not very clear, is it?" Beth said, echoing Jennie's own thoughts. "Can you tell if your Samantha resembles her in any way?"

Jennie scrutinized the photograph. "No, I can't make out her face at all. Only the dress is the same."

"The dress? You must be kidding!" Beth laughed. "Nobody wears clothes like that anymore."

"Samantha does," Jennie answered firmly.

"Well . . . she must be very odd!" exclaimed Beth.

"Yes," admitted Jennie. "Samantha is odd."

Beth closed the album and put it away. "Our club is having its first meeting next Wednesday. I told the other girls that you might join, Jennie. They were real happy."

"They were?" Jennie asked with disbelief.

"Oh, sure! They like you. We're going to meet in my basement at four. You won't forget, will you?"

"Oh no!" Jennie exclaimed. How could she possibly forget?

"Let's go into my room," suggested Beth. "I'll show you my doll collection."

Jennie saw a lot of Beth after that. They liked doing lots of the same things—bike riding, making doll clothes, playing games. One day they were exploring the woods behind Jennie's house.

They came upon the blueberry patch. Only a few straggly berries remained here and there on the bushes.

"So many bushes!" exclaimed Beth, "and not one

berry fit to eat." She plucked and then discarded a hard, wrinkled berry.

"You should have seen it when I was here with Samantha!" Jennie replied. "There were hundreds of fat, juicy ones."

"You and Samantha sure got around, didn't you?" Beth's soft blue eyes sparkled with friendly curiosity.

Jennie was suddenly flooded with memories. She looked at her new friend and knew that she could be trusted. Then, right then and there in the middle of the blueberry patch, Jennie related the whole story of Samantha from the time she had first appeared in the rose garden until the day she had disappeared so suddenly and finally in the same spot.

Beth listened without saying a word. Her face was grave and thoughtful. When Jennie finished, they sat in silence for a long time. Finally Beth spoke. "That's the weirdest story I've ever heard!" she said.

Jennie frowned. "Do you think I'm making it up?"

"No, I don't think that! Why should I?"

Jennie lowered her eyes. "Because that's what my father thinks. He thinks I imagined the whole thing."

"Of course you didn't imagine it," said Beth loyally. "Your mom doesn't think that, too, does she?"

Jennie nodded.

"Then we've got to prove to them that Samantha was really here," Beth told her.

"How can we?" asked Jennie. "Samantha's nowhere to be found and no one around here seems to know anything about a family named Talbot."

Beth smiled sweetly and mysteriously. "I do," she said. "And so does my mother."

Jennie's eyes widened. "But the Talbots in your family died a long time ago."

Beth was silent for a moment. "Did you know," she finally said, "that people used to say your house was haunted?"

Jennie shook her head.

"It's true," Beth told her. "My mother told me that when she was a little girl, people said that spirits roamed that house. They were supposed to have been seen in . . . ." She hesitated. ". . . in the *rose garden!*"

Jennie gasped.

"Nobody says that anymore," Beth continued. "People don't believe in ghosts now. Neither does my mom. But even so, when my grandmother died and left the house to us, my mom didn't want any part of it."

Jennie shook her head. "Samantha was real!" she insisted. "I know! I played with her all summer."

Beth shrugged. "Well, real or a ghost," she said practically, "we still want to prove to your parents that you didn't just imagine Samantha." She plucked another shriveled berry, looked at it with disgust, and threw it to the ground. "Listen, what about that cave? If you could take your parents there, it would be proof that you had been there with someone. You couldn't have found a place like that yourself. I've been living here all my life and I never heard of it."

Jennie brightened. "Oh Beth, would you help me? I've tried to find the cave myself once or twice, but I couldn't. Maybe if we looked together, we'd have better luck."

"Are you kidding?" Beth grinned. "This is the most exciting thing I've ever heard! Of course I'll help you."

10
THE TREASURE

Jennie and Beth searched and searched, but they could not find the cave. They tried first one path, then another. Jennie was confused. The woods were different now as autumn spread its arms around the countryside. Flowers faded, others appeared, leaves changed color. It was no longer the summer woods she had roamed with Samantha.

One October day when the air was cool and crisp and pumpkins had begun to appear at the roadside stands, Jennie and Beth made one last attempt to find the cave. It was Saturday. The two girls were going to have lunch at Beth's house first. Jennie's spirits were high as she walked toward her friend's house. She had just been selected to play the part of Gretel in a school production of *Hansel and Gretel* and, as if that were not enough, the girls in the club had elected her secretary. Jennie felt great.

As she hurried along, happily humming a tune, she casually put her hand into the pocket of the blue cotton dress she was wearing. To her surprise, she pulled out a folded sheet of paper. She unfolded it with a shock of recognition. It was the map Samantha had used to guide them to the cave.

Jennie stared at it in amazement. How could she have forgotten? It all came back to her now. She remembered how Samantha had looked over the

map and then given it to Jennie to hold in case they should become separated. *It had been right here in this dress pocket ever since!*

Jennie ran the rest of the way to Beth's house. As soon as Beth opened the door, Jennie waved the paper at her. "I found a map to the cave!" Jennie's face felt warm with excitement. "It's Samantha's map. I forgot that I had it."

"That's great!" Beth cried, and her eyes danced in response to Jennie's excitement. "We'll go right after lunch."

Beth's mother was in the kitchen flipping pancakes at the stove. "Sit down, girls. These are almost ready."

"M-m-m." A mouth-watering fragrance drifted in Jennie's direction. "Mrs. Phillips, those are the best-smelling pancakes in the world."

While they ate, Beth spoke about her plans for the meeting of their club that afternoon. She was president. "The girls like you so much, Jennie. Jean Mancini told me she's glad you moved to Phillipstown, and it was Angela Newman's idea to nominate you for secretary."

Jennie poured maple syrup over her pancakes. She felt warm and happy. "I like the other girls too," she said, smiling. "But what about our trip to the cave? How can we go if there's a club meeting?"

Beth glanced at the round copper clock on the wall. "We'll have time to do both," she asserted confidently.

They polished off the pancakes and were ready to go. Beth's mother, wiping her hands on her apron, came over to say good-bye. "Did you show Jennie the picture?" she asked.

"What snapshot?" inquired Jennie.

"Oh, I'm such a jerk!" exclaimed Beth. "My head

was so full of the club and the cave that I forgot all about the picture."

"What picture?" Jennie asked.

"I found another old album in the basement," Mrs. Phillips told her. "There was a photograph of Samantha, my great-grandfather's little girl. Show it to her, Beth."

Jennie's breath came faster as Beth took a snapshot from a drawer and silently handed it to her.

Jennie held the old creased snapshot with trembling hands. She looked down at it. The picture was in shades of brown instead of color or plain black and white. A tall man with an upturned mustache and whiskers stared up at her solemnly. At his side, holding his hand, was a little girl. She must have been about six, much younger than Jennie's Samantha, but the black ringlets, the bright-cheeked oval face, the deep, dark bottomless eyes. . . . Jennie gasped.

"What is it, Jennie?" Beth asked.

Jennie could hardly speak. The words came slowly. "It can't be! She's much younger here, of course, but . . . but . . . I'd swear that's my Samantha!"

There was a long, heavy silence that was strangely at odds with the bright, cozy cheerfulness of the kitchen. Finally Mrs. Phillips spoke. "She looks like such a lonely child."

Jennie stared at the snapshot. An overwhelming sense of Samantha came back to her, flooding her with memories of their happy summer together. She remembered her loneliness before Samantha had come. Could it have been? Could one lonely child have heard the call of another's unhappiness in her own garden? The dark eyes of the little girl in the photograph looked up at Jennie across the years.

Jennie felt a gentle touch on her arm. "You may keep the photograph, Jennie," said Mrs. Phillips softly.

Jennie put the picture into her pocket carefully, knowing that she would cherish it forever.

Beth tugged at her arm. "Let's go, Jennie."

They set off on their search through the woods. This time, with the help of the map, they found their way unerringly to the cave.

"Look!" Jennie pointed out the rippling brook with its convenient stepping-stones, then the thick clump of bushes beyond, which contained the secret cave. The girls picked their way between two bushes, now practically bare of leaves. There, just as Jennie had remembered it, was the cave.

Beth stared uncertainly at the small black hole, but Jennie did not hesitate. "Come on," she called, stepping into the opening. With some reluctance, Beth followed.

They stood in the large, dark entry-room of the cave.

"It's fantastic, just as you said," Beth whispered, her voice deep with wonder. "But where are the pictures?"

"They're in the inner room. We can't get in there because it was blocked off while I was here with Samantha. Remember the disturbance I told you about? Come on, I'll show you where it was." Jennie led the way across the room, then stopped with an exclamation of surprise.

The entrance to the inner room miraculously was open!

"How can that be?" Jennie wondered aloud. "It was sealed up completely!"

Beth examined the stones around the opening. "These rocks must have shifted again." She looked up at Jennie. "You're not planning to go in there, are you?"

"No way!" protested Jennie. "Not after what happened last time. I just want to get my parents here so I can prove that I wasn't making this up."

"I'll come with you," Beth added reassuringly. The girls clambered out of the cave and set off for Jennie's house.

In a short time they were back at the cave, this time with Jennie's parents. "See!" exclaimed Jennie in triumph, as Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, with some difficulty, squeezed their grown-up bulk through the child-sized opening. Jennie showed them the entrance to the inner chamber.

"Hm-m" said Mr. Andrews, as he stepped through, followed closely by Jennie's mother. The girls hesitated for a moment, then entered the inner room. It was unchanged from the time Jennie had been there before. The white light glowing from the walls and ceiling illuminated them in a pale glow.

"It's phosphorus—a substance that glows in the dark," explained Mr. Andrews, examining the luminous stones on the wall.

Jennie pointed to the far end of the chamber. "There are the portraits!"

The large frames, with their lifelike portraits, still stood as they had for so many years, silent guardians of the secret of the cave. Mrs. Andrews examined them. "These are magnificent!" she gasped. "They seem to be authentic colonial works."

"Look at the guns," Jennie said, indicating the pile of rusty weapons.

Her father shook his head in wonder. "It's a treasure trove of historical artifacts. This must have been a hiding place, perhaps during Revolutionary days. Whoever hid these things must have been unable to return. These things have been here ever since."

"That's exactly what Samantha thought," said Jennie.

Beth fingered one of the ancient rifles. "Maybe the owner was killed in the war."

Mrs. Andrews was still staring at the portraits. "These must be worth a small fortune. I wonder who they belong to?"

A sudden silence hung over the old cave. The adults looked at each other and then at the girls. Beth said, "You found them, Jennie. They belong to you."

"Wow!" Jennie felt a rising excitement. "Maybe we'll be rich."

Her father frowned. "Actually, they should belong to your friend Samantha. She found them first."

A wave of joy spread over Jennie at her father's words. She knew he had been doubting Samantha's existence. This meant that he finally believed Jennie's tale.

"But where is this Samantha?" asked Jennie's mother.

"And who is she?" Mr. Andrews echoed.

Again there was silence. Jennie smiled—a secret, knowing smile, as she put her hand in her pocket and touched the old photograph of a beautiful little girl of long ago.

11
THE ROSE SPRING

The next months were busy and exciting ones for Jennie. They sparkled with thrilling new events and people. The usually long days of winter seemed to speed by, and before long the frigid snows were melting into springtime.

One afternoon Jennie found herself at the center of a knot of laughing, chattering girls. A group of them broke off and left.

"Don't forget," one of the girls called back, "the club meeting is at my house tomorrow."

Jennie and Beth nodded, waved good-bye, and started off in the opposite direction.

"Did you know," remarked Beth as they strolled along, "that Angela Newman has proposed you for president next year?"

Jennie's eyes shone. "I know. She just told me about it. I'm so happy!"

"I'm sure the other kids will go along," Beth added.

"Best of all," said Jennie, "I know that the girls in the club like me for myself. They were nice to me and wanted me to join even before all that publicity."

Beth grinned. "You sure became popular in school after those newspaper articles and TV interviews."

Jennie nodded, remembering the excitement that had followed the discovery of the cave. She could still see the newspaper headlines in her mind:

LOCAL GIRL FINDS TREASURE . . . JENNIE ANDREWS DISCOVERS SECRET COLONIAL CAVE

Everyone in school had wanted to know her after that! And then there had been the TV interviews.

Beth and Jennie paused at the corner where they usually separated.

"Do you miss being famous, Jennie, now that it's over?" Beth inquired.

"Not really," Jennie answered, fastening the top button of her coat as the gusty March wind blew a chilly blast in her direction. "It was kind of wild for a while—giving interviews, posing for pictures, going to court. I guess it was fun at first, but now I'm just glad to have the time to concentrate on school and on my friends. The girls in our club are really great. I'd rather be with them than with some old newspaper reporter."

Beth shifted her books to the other arm. "It sure was exciting when you and your parents had to go to court to settle ownership of the cave. Everyone in school hung around me because I was the friend of a celebrity."

"Boy!" exlaimed Jennie. "If only we could have taken legal possession of that cave, we'd be rich now!" She made a face. "It doesn't seem fair that the cave turned out to be on public property."

"We were so surprised," commented Beth. "Most people around here had no idea that the woods in that area are part of the State Forest Preserve."

Jennie shrugged. "Well, they are! So now my cave belongs to the government."

"But you're still famous," Beth pointed out. "Now that the government has declared the cave

and its contents to be a historical monument, they've put up a plaque with your name on it as the discoverer."

Jennie's eyes sparkled. "Wow! I still can't get over that. Imagine *me*, the discoverer of a monument loaded with genuine colonial treasures!" She shook her head. "It's hard to believe that those portraits were painted around 1776." Jennie felt 10 feet tall when she thought about the tourists who were starting to come from all over to see the cave and how they would see her name there.

"It's like you're a part of history," Beth went on enthusiastically.

"I'm also freezing," Jennie added. Another icy blast whipped across her face. "I have a long walk home. I'd better get started before I turn into a chunk of ice." She looked at the patches of snow and ice still on the ground. "I don't think spring is ever going to come."

Beth was more optimistic. "Sure it will!" she said cheerfully. "It's March already."

The girls said good-bye and went their separate ways. Jennie was so chilled that she ran all the way and arrived home earlier than usual. She didn't want to disturb her parents. They were in their studios, painting, trying to make up for all the time they had lost that winter with the fuss surrounding the discovery of the cave. They were thankful now to have peace and quiet.

Jennie was seized with a peculiar restlessness. Despite the sharp March wind, there was definitely a new feeling in the air—a promise of spring. A strange longing stirred within Jennie.

She strolled out to the rose garden. The ground was still partially covered with a thin layer of snow, but patches of freshly green grass had begun to appear. Here and there a tiny crocus poked its bright head through the snow. The rose bushes

were already greening, and new life swelled impatiently on the thick, shiny branches.

Jennie breathed deeply. The air was so fresh and crisp. Samantha Junior, who had followed her out, jumped up onto a bench and immediately sprang off again. She mewed indignantly at the unexpected touch of winter—cold metal. Samantha Junior liked warmth and indoor comfort. She had grown fat and lazy during the winter. Almost all her time was spent dozing, curled up near the fireplace, or consuming great quantities of food. She was a furry black ball. Her belly bulged as she moved about the garden, searching for a warm spot.

A gentle current blew through Jennie's hair and caressed her neck. It was definitely warmer here in the rose garden. She closed her eyes. Thoughts of Samantha drifted through her mind.

"Howdy."

Jennie whirled about to see Ben, the gardener, regarding her with a good-natured grin. "How do, Miss Jennie!"

"Ben!" exclaimed Jennie. "I haven't seen you all winter. Is it already time to start spring gardening?" She was happy to see the old man.

Ben nodded. "Soon." He examined the rose bushes, giving each a quick, gentle touch. "Just checking up now to see what needs doin'."

"Did you hear about my cave?" Jennie inquired.

"Yup." Unlike everyone else, Ben didn't seem impressed. He was more interested in the shrubs. He touched the cold earth and looked at the sky critically. "Looks like it's going to be a rose spring," he said.

"What's a rose spring?" Jennie asked with curiosity.

"A cool, wet one. That's when ye get the best roses in June." He nodded emphatically. "Yup, it's going to be a rose spring, all right."

Ben finished his examination of the roses and

went off to inspect the front lawn. Jennie was alone again with the kitten. She touched the rose bushes the way Ben had done, wondering what that touch had told him. The phrase he had used lingered in her mind: *a rose spring!*

A warmer breeze suddenly touched Jennie's cheek like the touch of soft fingers.

"Jennie!" A sweet, singing voice drifted in with the breeze and floated across the garden.

Jennie gasped. "It's Samantha!" she exclaimed joyfully. "Samantha, are you here?"

There was no reply. Jennie ran about the garden, poking behind the bushes, peeking under the benches. The wind rustled through the bare branches of the rose bushes.

"Jennie!" Another gentle breeze whispered across the garden, murmuring faintly.

"Samantha!" called Jennie eagerly, "where are you?" She darted about, searching here, there, everywhere.

There was nobody else in the garden. Jennie stood for a long time, listening . . . listening . . . listening . . . , but she could hear nothing. She clenched her fists with disappointment and squeezed her eyes shut.

Then she felt something. But what? A touch that wasn't a touch. A presence that wasn't there but was, nevertheless, a loving presence. Jennie felt . . . she *knew* . . . that someone was with her. She was conscious of Samantha's closeness, of Samantha's love enveloping her. Jennie kept her eyes tightly shut, afraid to open them for fear of losing the moment, of losing Samantha again.

The moment passed. Jennie opened her eyes and looked around.

She was alone. But she was certain that for a moment—a brief moment—her friend had been with her again.

"*Don't forget me!*" the breeze had crooned.

A great joy filled Jennie's heart. "Oh, Samantha!" she cried. "I know you're here. We'll always be friends. I'll never forget you."

Jennie shivered then as fickle March sent a cold blast, scattering the snow and chilling the air. Samantha Junior nuzzled up against Jennie's leg for warmth and meowed a loud complaint. Jennie picked up the kitten. Cuddling it gently against her cheek, she began to walk slowly back to the house. Halfway there, she turned and looked back at the rose garden. It was empty. But in her mind's eye Jennie could see the shadowy figure of a fun-loving girl with lovely coal-black hair and a quaint Alice-in-Wonderland dress.

Jennie sighed deeply, remembering . . . remembering. Then she turned and hurried back to the house, quickening her step as she realized that it was time to telephone Beth about the next meeting of their club.

Weekly Reader Books